

BETWEEN FRANCE AND GERMANY: THE FORMATION OF BELGIAN
DEFENSE POLICY 1932-1940

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in History in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City
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Abstract

BETWEEN FRANCE AND GERMANY: THE FORMATION OF BELGIAN
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by

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This dissertation relies mainly on primary sources, including Belgian Ministry of National Defense documents long feared lost, many of which were very recently made available to western scholars and were used for the first time by this author, to analyze the factors that shaped Belgian defense policy in the late interwar period. It finds that Belgian defense policy was informed most of all by a desire to keep out of another war. This desire came from the awareness that Belgium would be devastated no matter which side won the new conflict. Most Belgians, and especially the senior Belgian Army officers, saw Germany as the main threat and for most of this period Belgian defense thinking was devoted to defense almost exclusively against the Germans.

Ironically, increasing German rearmament and belligerence led to Belgium's much criticized 1936 decision to distance itself from France because the price the government had to pay to the Socialists and Flemish for their support for Belgium's own rearmament was an "independent" foreign policy. Belgium's goal became the creation of an army strong enough to deter any aggressor from adding it to opposing forces.

Although Belgium had, by May 10, 1940, the date of the German invasion, built a large, strong, generally well-armed, and generally well-regarded army, ultimately, Belgium was not the master of its own fate and suffered the consequences of being on the easiest route between Germany and Paris.

The first chapter of the dissertation is an introduction tracing Belgian history from the first Celtic tribes mentioned by Julius Caesar to 1932. The second chapter examines the “Flemish Question,” which affected nearly every facet of government policy in the late inter-war period. The third chapter looks at other aspects of Belgian domestic policy. The fourth chapter studies Belgian foreign policy. The fifth chapter takes a look at interwar Belgian military thinking and the final chapter concentrates on the period between the 1938 Munich Conference and the 1940 invasion.

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I would like to dedicate this paper to the Belgian military and the Belgian people; they have gotten a bum rap for 1940 for far too long!

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Map 1: Belgium. <http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/europe/lcolor/becolor.htm>

Chapter 1: Belgium to 1932.

Belgium is a small country (11,700 square miles—about the same size as Maryland, the 42nd largest US state at 12,407 square miles) to have so many geographic problems. Some are man-made. A linguistic fault line divides Dutch-speaking Flanders in the north and usually dominant French-speaking Wallonia in the south and splits the country in half. The rivalry, not to say animosity, between the majority but usually weak Flemings and the minority but usually powerful Walloons has affected almost all aspects of Belgian life, including military policy, for centuries. Many of the problems resulting from this division have been solved, or at least ameliorated, since the devolution of governmental power from the center to the regions and the implementation of a federal system in the country in 1993 which effectively separated the Flemings from the Walloons and recognized the three regions of Wallonia, Flanders, and Brussels, a French-speaking city in Flanders. A visitor to Belgium with leisure time will be struck by the television stations broadcasting in Dutch or French but not subtitled into the other language. Although vying with each other, both Flemings and Walloons feel a sense of Belgian identity, as German occupiers found to their dismay in both World Wars, and a loyalty to the monarchy. Beyond that, perhaps only a shared admiration for the Anderlecht football (soccer) team or the “Red Devils,” the national football team, can unite the two. One author observes that “In any case, many Belgians would say that they don’t see themselves as Belgians at all, but as Flemings, or as Walloons, or as Flemings/Walloons first and Belgians second. For instance, in Flanders, a Fleming who becomes an international star is likely to be championed as a great Fleming but a

Walloon who becomes an international star will be claimed by the Flemish as a great Belgian.” He goes on to discuss Flemish and Walloon perceptions:

The Flemish cannot help feeling a little smug (if not downright vengeful) about their new-found ascendancy over the French-speaking Belgians. In any case, they think the French-speakers are responsible for their own fate: they are complacent, indecisive, and disdainful. The Walloons might call themselves easy-going and liberal-minded, bohemian even, but the Flemish see these traits as a tendency towards laziness, libertarianism and degeneracy. To Flemish eyes, Wallonia looks faintly scruffy and disorganized. . . .

All right, say the French-speaking Belgians, so the tables have turned, but it’s just typical of the Flemings that they want to ram the fact down our throats. They won’t speak French to us even though they know how; they put up signposts in Flemish, even in predominantly French-speaking areas of Flemish communes. . . .

But if all this seems unnecessarily aggressive, petty-minded and vindictive, what can you expect from *les paysans flamands* (Flemish peasants), a humorless, narrow-minded race, with a big chip on its shoulder?

Fodor’s, the noted guidebook company warns, “Many Flemish-speaking Belgians understand French and vice versa. Nonetheless, Belgians are often uncomfortable using the other region’s language. . . . So, speak the language of the region if you know it, or use English.”¹

Belgium is also very densely populated, with a population density of 878 people per square mile (compare with 549.9 people per square mile in Maryland) and very built-up, with 97 per cent of the country urban. This means that the problems of an army without much strategic depth are compounded by the difficulties in moving in the depth it has. It also means that that army will do a lot of fighting in urban environments.²

¹ *The World Almanac and Book of Facts*, 2003 edition, sv. Belgium, Maryland; private conversation with an Anderlecht fan in 2003; Antony Mason, *Xenophobe’s guide to the BELGIANS*, updated ed. (London: Oval, 2001), pp. 8-11; *Belgium and Luxembourg*, 1 ed. (New York: Fodor’s, 2001), p. xxviii; boldface in the original.

² *The World Almanac*, sv. Belgium.

Other Belgian problems are natural. With the exception of the North Sea, Belgium has no natural frontiers. In addition, a traveler through Belgium is struck by the flatness of most of the country. These two difficulties would not be such problems if it were not for Belgium's greatest problem: it is sandwiched between France and Germany. Belgium's location and easily transited geography-- its flatness and relative lack of major waterlines (Belgium only has two major rivers, the Meuse in the east and the Scheldt in the west) have made it the preferred invasion route since at least the time of the Franks. Given the ambitions of the states that would become modern France and Germany, Belgium has been invaded many times. In modern times, Belgium has represented the most convenient route for German armies to get to Paris without the bother of either the Swiss Alps, which would also be a longer route overall, or the bulk of the French armies (in World War One) or fortifications (World War Two). Historian James E. Mrazek noted that "Belgium has always been less a military prize than a geographical unfortunate. It temptingly offers some of the best terrain and facilities in northern Europe for tank and motorized columns. . . . Belgium is intersected by the best roads and railroads connecting the political centers of two historical military rivals, Germany and France."³

As if being positioned between France and Germany weren't enough, Belgium also has a short North Sea coastline which makes Belgium a dagger aimed at Britain and a target for anyone wishing Britain ill, such as Republican and Imperial France or Germany. Conversely, Belgium's strategic position *vis à vis* Britain has made that country Belgium's most reliable protector. "With the exception of the range of low hills around Ronse and the sea dunes along the coast, Flanders is unrelentingly flat, a

³ Ibid.; James E. Mrazek, *The Fall of Eben Emael* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1999), p. 19.

somewhat dreary landscape at its best in its quieter recesses where poplar trees and whitewashed farmhouses still decorate sluggish canals.”⁴

The north of the country near Holland has “dull, flat countryside on the whole, and the main attraction of the region is undoubtedly Antwerp, a large and ancient port. . . .” Unfortunately for the Belgians, the 1839 settlement that ratified Belgian independence also gave both banks of the mouth of the river Scheldt, which serves Antwerp as well as a strip of Limburg in the east to Holland. These were major strategic headaches for Belgium because Holland could either close the Scheldt to Belgian shipping, essentially strangling it, or the weak Dutch military could be unable to prevent another power from doing the same thing⁵

In the southeast of the country, bordering France, Luxembourg, and Germany, lies the forest of the Ardennes, famous for its mushrooms and wild boar and covering some or all of three Belgian provinces, Liège, Namur, and Luxembourg, including part of the German-speaking easternmost part of the nation. The highest part of the Ardennes is in this last region, “an expanse of windswept heathland.” However, that is not what people think of if they think of the Ardennes. “This region is given character and variety by its river valleys: deep, wooded, winding canyons reaching up to high green peaks, these are at times sublimely and inspiringly beautiful.”⁶

Belgium was one of the first industrialized nations, rising to become number six overall before the devastation of World War One. Much of its industry, including the world-reknoned *Fabrique National* arms factory, and its main coal deposits, which

⁴ Martin Dunford and Phil Lee, *Belgium and Luxembourg*, Rough Guides (London: Rough Guides, 1997), p. 116.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 190; Bernard A. Cook, *Belgium, A History*, Studies in Modern European History, vol. 50 (NY: Peter Lang, 2002), p. 62.

⁶ Dunford and Lee, p. 268.

fueled the industrialization, are situated in and around Liège and the neighboring Campine region.⁷

Although modern humans have lived in Belgium since around 150,000bce, the first written record of Belgium or of any Belgians occurs in Julius Caesar's *Gallic War*. Caesar refers to the Celtic tribe of the *Belgæ*, who "are the bravest [of the Gauls], because they live farthest removed from civilization and human refinement, because merchants do not often visit them and bring those things which tend to weaken the spirit, and because the Germans, who live across the Rhine, are quite close and the Belgians continually fight with them." Many Belgian place names, including the Ardennes, which comes from the Celtic "*ard*," meaning "high," derive from the language of the *Belgæ*, which was related to Irish and Welsh. The territory of modern Belgium was occupied by Caesar's legions in seven campaigns from 57bce to 50bce. The *Belgae* won the respect of the Romans for their bravery but ended up in the Roman province of Gallia Belgica. Roman law, the Latin language, and Christianity were introduced. The Romans left lower Flanders after a devastating North Sea storm in 270ce, returned, and left for good in the fifth century as part of their general withdrawal. Meanwhile, Germanic Frankish, Frisian, and Saxon tribes were moving into the area with the Franks and Saxons settling in present-day Belgium. The city of Tournai in the south became the capital of the Frankish Merovingian dynasty which eventually renounced Roman rule and began a campaign to occupy all of Gaul. The Franks occupied and inhabited the mainly empty northern lands conceded by the retreating Romans but were absorbed by the Latinized Celts in the south, leading to the survival of the Romance language and of the language frontier lasting to

⁷ Larry Zuckerman, *The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I* (NY: NYU, 2004), p. 1; *New Columbia Encyclopedia*, 1975, sv. Belgium.

the present day. A forest called the Silva Carbonara, running from the Rhine river to the North Sea, served as the geographical representation of this frontier. The Romanized Celts were referred to as the “Wala,” derived from the Old German *Wealh*, meaning “foreigner” or “Celt.” Their language was called “waals,” which evolved into “Walloon.” One can see reminders of this ancient past in place names in today’s Belgium, with “~court,” “~gem,” or “~hem” deriving from Germanic roots and “~ville” coming from the Romanized Celts.⁸

Belgium then became part of the Frankish Empire founded by Carolus Magnus (Charlemagne) who was born near Liège. The Treaty of Verdun of 843, following the death of Charlemagne’s son Louis the Pious, split Belgium in three as an aspect of the tripartite division of the Empire. Charles got Belgium west of the Scheldt river as part of his holdings of West Frankland (mainly present-day France) while Lothar got the part from the Scheldt to the Meuse. In 925, Germany annexed Lotharingia (for the first time) and the Scheldt formed the Franco-German border. As Germany developed into the Holy Roman Empire and fragmented into feudalism, functionally independent nobles arose in the Low Countries. These almost autonomous regions were the ancestors of eight of today’s nine Belgian provinces (Antwerp being the ninth). The Holy Roman Emperors still appointed the bishops and the dukes of Lower Lotharingia (the Low Countries). The Prince Bishopric of Liège survived until the French annexation of 1794 and one of the dukes of Lower Lotharingia was Godfrey of Bouillon, one of the leaders of the First Crusade. Eventually, Lower Lotharingia was renamed Brabant, one of the present day Belgian provinces.⁹

⁸ Cook, p. 1; Julius Caesar quoted in *ibid*; *ibid.*, pp. 1-3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5; *New Columbia Encyclopedia*, sv. “Godfrey of Bouillon”.

The County of Flanders, which gave its name to two Belgian provinces, developed in response to the Viking invasions of the ninth and tenth centuries. The Frankish kings granted the counts land and power as rewards for their services in defending the Empire against the Norse hordes. By the eleventh century the counts of Flanders were as good as independent. Ghent was the seat of the counts but they also built up the gorgeous canal town of Bruges and Ieper, better known as “Ypres,” of World War One fame. Flanders was pushed south until stopped by the Norse duchy of Normandy. The counts of Flanders also built canals and the first roads since the Romans. The first count of Flanders, “Iron Arm” Baldwin, abducted and married the daughter of the Frankish king Charles the Bald, “a proven method for social climbing.” A descendant of this couple married William the Conqueror. The counts of Flanders ended up vying with Holland for control of the Zeeland islands and the mouth of the Scheldt estuary. The Dutch sought help from, among others, the king of France. The Count, Guy, opposed as well by the burghers of Ghent for favoring the patricians, was summoned to France and forced to renounce his alliance and trade with England. This hurt the Flemish merchants so much that they turned around and supported Guy, enabling him to sign a treaty with the English in 1297. He then renounced his fealty to France. The French army moved in, the urban patricians surrendered, and Flanders was put under French control.¹⁰

In 1302, a grandson of Guy, Count of Flanders, launched an anti-French revolt from Bruges. The guilds wanted to maintain their trade with England while the French occupation engendered a xenophobia among the Flemish populace. The occupation also intensified the rivalry between the common people and the patricians. The common people spoke Flemish and the patricians had adopted French as “the language of political

¹⁰L.J.R. Milis, quoted in Cook, p. 7; *ibid.*, p. 11.

power.” Bruges was occupied on May 17 of that year. The Flemish forces faded into the population at large and the next day, led by the butcher Pieter de Coninck and the weaver Jan Breydel, they started attacking individual Frenchmen. They massacred anybody, Frenchman or patrician alike, who could not pronounce their shibboleth “Schild en Vriend” (shield and friend). One hundred and twenty Frenchmen died as well as many patricians. Six weeks later, near Kortrijk, 600 mounted Bruges craftsmen with 10,000 footsoldiers armed with *goedendags* (wake-up calls), spiked balls on four-foot chains, fought 2,500 French knights accompanied by 5,000 archers. The soggy terrain and a stream separating the forces prevented the French from making the best use of their cavalry and the battle, known as the “Battle of the Golden Spurs,” so named for the pile of golden spurs taken from the dead knights and piled on the field, was a tremendous victory for the Flemings. Unfortunately for the French knights, the Flemish craftspeople were not familiar with the tradition of keeping captured knights alive and ransoming them. In all, 2,000 French knights died and July 11 is still celebrated as the Flemish national day.¹¹

Only three years later, a pro-French Count of Flanders sided with the patricians, punished the rebellious cities with indemnities, and gave some land to France. There were continual revolts against the patricians until 1328 when a French army smashed the peasants and allowed the count to consolidate his power.¹²

In 1338 the Hundred Years War began between the French and English. Louis de Nevers, Count of Flanders, sided with the former but the Flemish cities, tied by trade to England, supported the latter. A pro-guild and pro-merchant noble, Jacob van Artevelde,

¹¹ Ibid., 12-13.

¹² Ibid., pp. 13-14

who is still a hero in Flanders, started by imposing his will on previously faction-riven Ghent, allied with Ieper and Bruges, and attempted to unite Flanders against the French. In 1340 the Flemish cities renounced Louis de Nevers and van Artevelde officially allied Ghent with England, whose king, Edward III, was declared king of France. Five years later, Jacob van Artevelde, who had lived by the sword, died by the sword after guildsmen distrustful of his scheme to make the English Black Prince the count of Flanders burst into his castle and hacked him to death. This was such a brutal time that contract killings were recognized as binding obligations in the courts. In any case, his son Philip took over the fight against the French and their collaborators. The new pro-French Count of Flanders was able to use the resentment of towns dominated by Ghent against van Artevelde to build an army which, with French help, defeated the Ghent forces at Westrozebeke in 1382. Philip was killed in the battle and the Flemish cities, their independence destroyed, found themselves in the French orbit.¹³

Meanwhile, in Brabant, the urban elites parlayed the rivalry between the dukes and local barons into autonomy. In 1312, upon the death of the duke John II and his succession by a young child, the elites forced the duke's representatives to sign the *Blijde Inkomst* (Happy Entry), a municipal charter in which ducal power could be ignored if the duke were to violate "the laws and traditions of Brabant" but which also guaranteed the indivisibility of the duchy. On the death of this child, grown to manhood, in 1355, John III's daughter and her husband the grand duke of Luxembourg were also forced to sign such a charter. However, both sides occasionally violated the pact, which the urbanites

¹³ Ibid., pp. 14-16.

did in this case by ceding Antwerp and Mechelen to another son-in-law of John III, Louis de Male, who had invaded in 1357.¹⁴

In 1369 Louis's daughter Margaret married Philip the Bold of Burgundy. Thus began over one hundred years of Burgundian domination. Philip's grandson, Philip the Good, became the Count of Flanders. As he had already inherited Brabant, Mechelen, Limburg, and Antwerp and was able to place relatives into the bishoprics of Liège and Utrecht, Philip was the first ruler since Charlemagne to unite all of modern Belgium in one single state. Philip was not shy about throwing his power around, depriving the cities of Bruges and Ghent of many of their rights. Thanks to peace, a stable currency, and bad outbreaks of the plague every ten years or so, which lowered the number of available workers thus driving prices up, those Burgundians who survived thrived. Their wealth led to increased demand for luxury goods and stimulated trade. The "Flemish Primitives" (artists) represented one aspect of a "golden age of prosperity and culture." The elites and the bureaucracy of the state were Francophone.¹⁵

Philip's son, Charles the Bold, tried to expand Burgundy into Alsace and Lorraine, bringing him into conflict with Louis XI of France. He was defeated and killed at the battle of Nancy in 1477 and France took most of Francophone Burgundy, including the Duchy of Burgundy itself. There remained a "Low Land state," consisting of the remaining Walloon areas as well as the Dutch-speaking region, and centered in Flanders and Brabant. A Dutch historian complains that the ties with the Francophone provinces "by strengthening the class and official position of the French language in the whole country, helped to corrupt their civilization." Charles's failed wars also ended the good

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 18

¹⁵ Cook, 19-20.

times in Burgundy and in the 1490s over 50 percent of the inhabitants of Ghent were classified as paupers. The Flemish cities capitalized on Charles's death to extort from his daughter Mary of Burgundy a new charter of urban rights. However, this death did not lead to a new dynasty but rather a continuing union of equal principalities. The representative body of this union was the States General, founded by the Burgundians to raise taxes.¹⁶

For her part, Mary sought to forestall Louis XI by marrying Maximilian of Habsburg, the son of the Holy Roman Emperor. This marriage tied the low countries to the Empire for the next three hundred years although the Dutch-speaking areas resented the Habsburgs, as they had the Burgundians, as foreign rulers. Maximilian then wedded his children to those of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, famous for finishing the liberation of Spain, the dispatch of Christopher Columbus, and the expulsion of the Jews. Maximilian alienated his Dutch constituents by his expensive attempts to regain the Francophone lands lost at Nancy. His son, who died unexpectedly in Spain in 1506, was succeeded by Charles, a native, who had been born in Ghent in 1500. Charles was recognized as adult and ruler by the States General in 1515, King of Spain in 1516, and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V three years later. Charles forced Francis I of France to renounce all claims to Flanders, Artois, and Tournai after the battle of Pavia in 1525. Charles created a centralized administration based in Brussels for the seventeen provinces he called the "Burgundian Circle" and gave them a special position and virtual autonomy in the Holy Roman Empire. In 1549, in the "Pragmatic Sanction," he declared the Burgundian Circle indivisible. Charles, as a Fleming, recognized the autonomy of the cities and regions of the Low Countries, agreeing to conditions made by these areas in

¹⁶ Ibid.,p.20; Pieter Geyl quoted in *ibid.*

order to collect taxes from them in order to pay for his war against France. Dutch and Belgian cities flourished, with twenty-nine percent of the residents of Hainaut, the least urban part of the Low Countries, living in towns in the early sixteenth century. The number for all of Holland was forty-six percent. Antwerp boomed, as did Amsterdam, while the Low Countries became a leading center of European trade. Their deep exposure to capitalism would go on to shape the destiny of the region and form a national consciousness. “To be members of the leading classes in the wealthiest, most densely populated and artistically most creative area north of the Alps reinforced their sense of self-esteem.” Unfortunately, this sense of unity would shortly be sundered.¹⁷

In 1556 Charles abdicated in favor of his son Philip II. At the same time, Protestantism spread throughout the Low Countries. Attempts by Charles to stem the flood had failed as he rejected the use of force. His son, who spoke neither Dutch nor French, did not share the same scruples or ideal of local autonomy. In addition, Philip’s refusal to pay out bonds angered Antwerp investors while Antwerp cloth processors were devastated by the cessation of their relationship with England in 1563. The next year the price of grain and bread rose as a result of a poor harvest. In April 1566, a coalition of angry nobles united in the “Compromise of Breda” (which is in southern Holland). They proudly adopted the sobriquet of “beggars” which had been used to describe them by a Spanish nobleman. Meanwhile, Philip loosed the Inquisition on the Calvinists while in August 1566 a Flemish preacher instigated a wave of iconoclasm whose result is still visible today. The next year Philip sent an army of 20,000 men under the Duke of Alba (who is still reviled in the Low Countries for his brutality) to put down the commotion.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 22; E.H. Kossmann, *The Low Countries, 1780-1940*. Oxford History of Modern Europe (Oxford:Clarendon, 1978), p. 10; Kas Deprez and Louis Vos, quoted in Cook, p. 22.

The Duke executed 1,071 people and dispossessed thousands more. One of those dispossessed was William of Orange, who would go on to lead the anti-Spanish uprising. The Duke of Alba beheaded two Catholic Counts in Brussels for urging compromise.¹⁸

The revolution, remarkable for its savagery, broke out in 1568. The rebels fought for religious freedom, local autonomy, and/or lower taxes. Like the later American revolutionaries, they did not originally aim at independence. It would take thirteen years for the States General to declare their secession from Philip's sovereignty and another few years for the remaining free states to declare their own sovereignty. William of Orange, whose power base was in Holland, was able to persuade the Catholic Southern Netherlands (i.e. Belgium) to join in his revolt and in 1576 the Pacification of Ghent, accepted even by Philip's brother Don John of Austria, assured religious freedom in the Low Countries. He was even willing to temporarily accept a united States General. However, the radical Calvinists were unwilling to tolerate Catholicism and they alienated the nobility of the southern provinces who distrusted the spread of Calvinism. These threw their support behind Don John who led an army with the Duke of Parma to reassert Habsburg control over the south. On January 6, 1579, delegates from Artois, Hainault, Namur, Luxembourg, and Limburg declared their loyalty to the Habsburgs and to Catholicism. Two and a half weeks later, delegates from Brabant, Flanders, Tournai, Holland, Zeeland, and Guelders signed the Union of Utrecht and officially seceded from Spain. One historian observes that "[t]here is one other factor which needs emphasis even in the briefest survey: in the Southern Netherlands where the Revolt started but failed, social antagonisms were much more serious and stubborn than in Holland and Zeeland where the Revolt came later but was successful." Among the reasons for this was the

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 22-3.

class rivalry in the southern cities compared to a more relaxed atmosphere in the Dutch cities where the bourgeoisie socialized with the lower classes. As well, the Dutch aristocrats were poor and impotent compared to their southern neighbors and lacking in a noble tradition. “As a result, the two small maritime provinces were socially more homogeneous than any other provinces in the Low Countries. This, next to political and purely military factors, helps to explain why it was possible for them to continue revolutionary policies which in other areas tended to be paralyzed by numerous inner conflicts. . . .”¹⁹

In the end, it was the fortune of arms that determined who remained free and who stayed with the Habsburgs. The Duke of Parma’s army of 11,700 surrounded, reduced, and starved the Flemish and Brabantine cities one by one, with Ghent falling in September 1584 and Brussels six months later, on August 17, 1585, after a long siege which included the creation of an 800-yard-long blockade bridge erected by the Spanish to cut the city off from resupply by sea or from the Calvinists to the north. The Duke of Parma expelled all Protestants from the city as well as from all other areas of Flanders and Brabant. By 1587, 200,000 Catholic refugees had left, with many bringing their skills to Holland. In 1588 the English destruction of the Armada wrecked any Spanish chances of reasserting control over the northern provinces and in 1609 the Spanish accepted a twelve year truce that essentially acknowledged Dutch independence.²⁰

In the southern provinces, allegiance to the Habsburgs remained and there was a Spanish governor in Brussels. The Spanish controlled military and foreign policy but left domestic affairs to the locals, who gained “conditional independence” after Philip II gave

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 33; Kossmann, pp. 11-13.

²⁰ Cook, p. 34.

the region to his daughter Isabella and her husband. In 1621 the territory reverted to the rule of Philip IV of Spain, Isabella having failed to produce an heir. The Spanish pursued a centralizing policy and the States General was not summoned between 1634 and 1794. Meanwhile, the Thirty Years War broke out in 1618 between the Spanish and the Dutch. The French took the Dutch side and Belgium became once again a battlefield. In 1640, James Howell called Flanders “the cockpit of Europe.” The French took Arras that same year and in 1643 smashed the Spanish at Rocroi. In 1648, the Spanish king made peace with the Netherlands in order to be able to concentrate on the French threat. The Peace of Münster recognized Dutch independence and their closing of the mouth of the Scheldt River, starving Antwerp.²¹

Antwerp recovered in the seventeenth century to again become a financial, trade, and cultural center. The Flemish textile industry also rebounded from an early hit due to the preference for lighter cloth from Verviers. Nevertheless, many Belgians were hard pressed, with quality of life decreasing and personal debt increasing.²²

At the same time, the Spanish brought the Counter-Reformation and the Jesuits to their part of the Netherlands. One historian compares the position of Catholicism in Flanders to its position in Poland and Ireland as “a sign of the country’s survival” and a source of unity and self-esteem when Flanders seemed marginalized.²³

Flanders retained its position as “the cockpit of Europe” in the later seventeenth century when “the French invaded with monotonous regularity the Spanish possessions which the impotent government at Brussels, badly led and without sufficient money, could not protect.” “In dreary succession came the War of Devolution (1667-1668), the

²¹ Ibid., pp. 34-5; quoted in *ibid.*, p. 35.

²² Ibid., pp. 35-6

²³ Ibid., pp. 36-7

Dutch War (1672-1678), the War of the League of Augsburg (1690-1697), and the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1713).” The Low Countries saw some of the most impressive military feats of the age during these wars. During the Dutch War, the French, led by the famed military engineer the Marquis de Vauban, the greatest contemporary theorist of siege warfare, took Maastricht, generally considered the strongest fortress in Europe, in only thirteen days. Interestingly, Maastricht is not far from Eben Emael, considered the strongest fortress in Europe before World War Two, which fell in just over a day. The relatively easy French seizure of Maastricht alarmed other European nations who sided with the Dutch to counterbalance French dominance. Although these other powers kept France from realizing its most grandiose war aims, the Southern Netherlands had to feed some territory, including parts of Flanders and Hainaut, into the Gallic maw. During the War of the League of Augsburg, Vauban led the French in seizing the city and the citadel of Namur, then as now strategically placed where the Meuse and Sambre rivers joined. However, the French themselves would later be besieged and beaten at Namur by the Dutch. After their defeat the French conducted a scorched-earth retreat from Flanders with the goal of putting it “in a position whereby she would be unable to contribute anything to Spain for a long time to come.” Five years later, in 1700, the French tried to put King Louis’s grandson, Philip of Anjou, on the throne of Spain, recently vacated by the deceased Charles II, the last Spanish Habsburg. This gambit was not well received by other European states such as England, Holland, and the Holy Roman Empire who were determined to keep France at its then-current size and to prevent France’s seizure of the Spanish Netherlands and empire. In 1706, troops led by the Duke of Marlborough and Prince Eugene of Savoy, two of the great military

figures of the age, defeated the French at Ramillies, near Namur, and forced the latter to give up most of the land they had taken in the Spanish Netherlands. Although the French rebounded to take Ghent and Bruges in 1708, the Duke of Marlborough's conclusive victory at Oudenaarde the next year led to the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht in which the French renounced all claims to the Spanish Netherlands. The Dutch, who had jointly ruled the Southern Netherlands with England since the battle of Ramillies, insisted on being able to retain control of fortresses they had occupied there since the 1670s. This was granted them in the 1715 (ratified in 1719) "Barrier Treaty" which further provided that the Habsburgs pay for the upkeep of the Dutch troops.²⁴

As there was still a lack of a living, breathing Spanish Habsburg heir, the Southern Netherlands were transferred to Charles VI of Austria and were renamed the Austrian Netherlands. Although the provinces and their inhabitants were devoted to their autonomy and required Charles be inaugurated in each province, there was a sense of "the unity of the entire Southern Netherlands." Unfortunately, Charles's death without male heir in 1740 led to the "War of the Austrian Succession" in which the Prussians and the French each sought to put their claimant on the throne. The Dutch fortifications in the Southern Netherlands availed them naught as the French rapidly seized them although they were forced by the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle of 1748 to give them back to the Dutch. The same treaty recognized Maria Theresa as the Habsburg empress. It also eliminated many trade restrictions, boosting exports. The Austrian Netherlands boomed under Maria Theresa and her governor, Charles of Lorraine. Roads were paved with

²⁴ Kossmann, p. 17; Cook, p. 37; Henry Guerlac, "Vauban: The Impact of Science on War" in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986), p. 73; Cook, p. 38; *New Columbia Encyclopedia*, sv. "Netherlands, Austrian and Spanish"; François Michel le Tellier, Marquis of Louvois, quoted in Cook, pp. 38-9; Kossmann, pp. 18-19.

cobblestones while many more roads were built, from a low of 37 miles in 1715 to 620 in 1789. The port of Ostend was improved and linked with Aachen, giving the Germans access to the port and to Southern Netherlands goods. At the same time the local coal industry was greatly expanded and new glass factories were established. As the coal industry advanced so did the iron industry. In 1770 a Liègeois invented a method of producing iron with coke instead of charcoal, allowing the Belgians to better utilize their coal deposits.²⁵

Maria Theresa died and was succeeded by her son Joseph II in 1780. At the time, the Austrian Netherlands and the Prince-Bishopric of Liège contained about 2,650,000 people and were unusually urbanized with twenty-five percent of residents living in cities, the largest being Brussels (75,000 denizens), Antwerp, Ghent, and Liège. Sixty-five percent of the population spoke Dutch (90 percent of the Bruxellois). They were described as

creatures of habit, and day succeeds day in an atmosphere of undisturbed peacefulness. The good fortune of the people is its calmness, and life is lived in a straight line. Its affections have no emotion and its pleasures no movement. Its spirit, indeed, has little brilliance; and it may justly be said that it makes greater use of its moral sense than of its intellectual faculties.

Nevertheless, Maria Theresa was a patron of the Enlightenment and Charles of Lorraine's successor, Count von Cobenzl, preferred the state censor to the ecclesiastical censor and tolerated the publication of the works of the French philosophes and in 1773 he eliminated the Jesuit colleges and replaced them with Theresian Colleges.²⁶

Maria Theresa's advice to Joseph was to respect the local customs of the Southern Netherlands, the "happy country (...) [*sic*] which furnishes us with so many resources"

²⁵ Cook, p. 40; Kossmann, p. 21.

²⁶ Quoted by Adrien de Meeüs, quoted in Cook, p. 42; Cook, p. 43.

and which “tenaciously retain[s] their ancient and even ridiculous prejudices, they are obedient and loyal and contribute more than our extensive and malcontent German lands.” Joseph did not heed her words and began to remake the area. He got off to a bad start when he told the Estates of Brabant “I need no consent from you to do good.” In 1781 Joseph issued his Edict of Toleration which gave Protestants and Jews the rights of citizenship and allowed them limited religious practice. He also modified the system of administration and went after the monasteries. In 1784 he instituted civil marriage and the next year required that the state censor pass all sermons. In 1786 he dissolved religious confraternities and took charge of seminary training by establishing a General Seminary in Louvain. Finally, in 1787, he tried to eliminate all regional and urban privileges and redraw the map of the Austrian Netherlands, creating new provinces ruled by civil administrators.²⁷

These measures deeply offended all sectors of Belgian society, which were jealous of their prerogatives and were fiercely Catholic. In 1787, reacting to a series of bad harvests, the call by a Brussels lawyer, Henri Van der Noot, for a tax strike in protest of Joseph’s violation of the *Blijde Inkomst*, and the depletion of the Habsburg garrison in favor of Austria’s war against Turkey, the population of the Austrian Netherlands protested so strongly that the Habsburg monarch was forced to withdraw some of his edicts although he refused to annul his attack on the clergy. It was also at this time that the Belgian black-yellow-red cockade representing the union of the colors of Brabant and Hainaut first appeared. On January 26, 1789, Joseph overawed the Belgian Third Estate by the threat of force. A poster was put up declaring “The legitimate heirs of the liberty, the privileges, and especially the valor of the Belgians announce the death of their

²⁷ Maria Theresa, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 44; Joseph II, quoted in *ibid.*; *ibid.*

Grandmother Joyeuse Entrée [Blijde Inkomst] and that of their Grandfather the Constitution of Brabant, both cruelly assassinated.” Henri Van der Noot fled to the Netherlands to keep up his campaign against the Habsburgs and for the union of Belgium and the Netherlands. Joseph’s agents took advantage of their new strength and revoked the rights of the Estates of Hainault and Brabant. This culminated in the imperial repudiation of the *Blijde Inkomst* on June 18, 1789. This action, in contradiction to his solemn promises, alienated the sections of society, notably those urbanites who favored the Enlightenment, who had previously supported Joseph. Another lawyer, François Vonck, organized an armed resistance movement called *Pro Aris et Focis* (For Altar and Hearth) which joined with the Van der Nootists to invade Belgium on October 24, 1789. Brabant repudiated Joseph while the Austrian forces were defeated at Turnhout and Ghent. By Christmas all of Belgium except for Luxembourg was in rebel hands. The States General met for the first time in almost 160 years and on January 11, 1790, enacted a constitution based on the American example and called the Act of Union. The new state was called the *Confédération des Etats Belgiques Unis* (Confederation of United Belgian States). However, the new state was torn between conservatives, the traditional Estates, the clergy, and the Van der Nootists on the one hand and the French-style democrats and the Vonckists on the other. One historian suggests the failure of the Brabantine revolution resulted more from Belgium’s “relatively advanced economic stage and a lack of economic grievance in the middle classes than [from] an excess of traditionalism.” Joseph died in the middle of all this and was succeeded by his brother, Leopold II. Backed by the anti-French alliance of Holland, Britain, and Prussia, and revoking

Joseph's edicts, Leopold was able to reassert Habsburg control over Belgium and Austrian troops were back in Brussels by the end of 1790.²⁸

Leopold himself was not long for this world and died in 1792. The same year France declared war on Austria and French forces smashed the Austrians at Jemappes in Belgium on November 6, 1792. A little over a month later, the Austrian Netherlands became a French protectorate and were annexed to France in March 1793. The Austrians rebounded and defeated the French at Neerwinden on March 18 of that year, reasserting Habsburg control. Austrian dominion definitively failed on June 26, 1794 when the French revolutionary armies defeated the Habsburgs at Fleurus. The last Austrian fortress, Luxembourg City, fell in June 1795.²⁹

Meanwhile, in the Prince Bishopric of Liège, which was not legally part of the Austrian Netherlands, industry, prosperity, and Enlightenment ideas were booming. Revolution in Liège followed the seizure of the Bastille in Paris. In August 1789 the Prince-Bishop was overthrown and the Assembly announced a "Declaration of the Rights of Man" with the end of feudal rights and the beginning of universal male suffrage. The Prussians reinstated the prince-bishop but Liègeois and Brabançon revolutionaries met in Paris and formed the "Committee of United Belgians and Liègeois" on January 20, 1792. Belgian historian Adrien de Meeüs called this "modern Belgium's birthday." The Belgians and Liègeois provided three corps and a legion to the French forces, which were seen as liberators. Belgium was split as the Flemish reasserted their traditional rights and

²⁸ Cook, pp. 44-5; Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 45; Ellen Evans quoted in *ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; *New Columbia University*, sv. "French Revolutionary Wars"; Cook, p. 47.

autonomy while the Walloons pressed for union with France. This would not be the last time Flanders showed itself much more conservative than Wallonia.³⁰

The French army soon showed that it was not a liberator but a looter. Indeed, it was so enthusiastic that propertied Belgians called on France to annex the region in order to stop the pillage. Their wish was granted on October 1, 1795, with the Austrian Netherlands, the duchy of Bouillon, and Liège joining the Republic. Thus were united the constituents of modern Belgium which also owes its division into nine provinces to the French administration. The last remnants of feudalism were abolished and the Catholic Church persecuted and dispossessed. Priests were forced to take “an oath of hatred for royalty” or have their churches closed. Many churches were closed and 585 priests were sent to the French prison of Devil’s Island. The University of Louvain was shuttered in 1797 while conscription was introduced the next year. Conscription led to a peasant’s revolt, which was brutally put down by the French, in contrast to the restrained behavior of the Belgian peasants themselves. This revolt formed the basis for a historical novel, *De Boerenkrijg (The Farmer’s War)*, by the most talented of the early Flemish Romantic authors and nationalists, Hendrik Conscience. The French also imposed their language on Belgian administration, building on the “spontaneous cultural process” that saw the Belgian elites adopt that language.³¹

Things changed after Napoleon Bonaparte seized power in France. Napoleon reconciled the State and the Church in 1801 and promulgated the Napoleonic Code that formed the basis for modern Belgian law. He also introduced civil equality and “the modern bureaucratic state.” He later alienated the religious Belgians when he abducted

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 47-8; quoted in *ibid.*, p. 48.

³¹ Cook, pp. 49-50; Kossmann, pp 74-5, 172; Cook, p. 51.

and held hostage the Pope, ousted critical bishops, drafted seminarians loyal to the ousted bishops, and introduced a catechism “stressing loyalty to the French state.”³²

Materially Belgium did very well in this period, developing into one of the most industrial countries in the world. The population boomed and industrial modernization and expansion as well as economic development were boosted by French policies including access to the imperial French market and the installation of the Continental System. Indeed, Belgium passed much larger France in this regard. Belgium had 89 blast furnaces in 1814; France had that many only in 1864. In 1810, little Belgium produced half the coal of the entire Empire and a quarter of its iron. Propertied entrepreneurs purchased cheaply confiscated Church lands, used the resulting revenue or rents to finance their industrialization, and erected factories on their new land. Monasteries and convents in Liège became the glass and armaments works for which the region is still famous while Ghent became one of the most important industrial cities in the Empire. France also contributed to the rebound of Antwerp, which had been strangled since 1648 by Dutch control over the mouth of the Scheldt River. Napoleon opened that mouth although the British promptly blockaded the port. Some Belgians made fortunes supplying the needs of Napoleon’s army, which gave most of its contracts to Belgian firms in light of Belgium’s workforce and development. Workers, however, remained at the subsistence level of income.³³

After suffering by way of Napoleon’s conscription to fill the ranks of his army (160,000 men in 1813) and being appalled by his treatment of the Pope, few Belgians regretted the arrival of the Allied armies in 1814. Napoleon seemed done. The Congress

³² Ibid., p. 50.

³³ Ibid., p. 51; Kossmann, p. 79; Cook, p. 51; Kossmann, *ibid*; Cook, p. 51-2.

of Vienna gave three of Belgium's easternmost cantons, Eupen, Malmèdy, and St. Vith to Prussia and amalgamated the rest with Holland in order to provide a buffer zone against future French aggression. However, Napoleon was not done and he returned from exile in June 1814. He immediately took over and raised a new army. He hoped to defeat his enemies one by one before they could mass their forces. He had early success against British forces (including Belgian troops) led by the Duke of Wellington and against Prussian (and other German) forces commanded by Marshal Blücher at Quatre Bras and Ligny on June 16. The French failed to pursue in a timely manner the retreating Prussians, allowing them to join up with the British while the French forces under General Grouchy who were belatedly sent after Blücher were unable to return to the main French forces before the climactic battle. On the night of June 17 the British were encamped in the town of Waterloo while the French were some miles south. The Battle of Waterloo began at 11:30am as French troops launched a diversionary attack at the Scottish-held fortified farm of Hougomont on the British right. The attack failed and a visitor to the farm today can still see bullet holes and firing slits carved out by the Redcoats defending it. The French under Marshal Ney also repeatedly went at the British center and were repulsed. A British cavalry counterattack was stopped by the French artillery and the King's German Legion and two companies of Nassau Germans were pushed out of another fortified farm, threatening the British center. The day was saved by Marshal Blücher's timely arrival and attack on the French flank at 4:30 and farm of Papelotte at 6. At 7 Napoleon went for broke, sending in his elite undefeated Old Guard against Wellington. The Old Guard's winning streak was broken and the Prussians took Papelotte. By 8:15 the Allies were on the offensive everywhere and the Old Guard broke.

It was all over by 9pm. The battlefield looks very different today because the Dutch king took topsoil from the entire area to build a giant mound commemorating the spot where his son was wounded while fighting for the British. The difference in height can still be seen on surviving buildings and monuments. The high mound is topped with a large statue of a lion. The French complained that the lion was roaring at them and were answered that the lion was not roaring at France, it was mooning Britain. The battlefield is littered with memorials and interestingly, if one were to go only by the monuments and souvenir stores, one would conclude the French won the battle. Most monuments commemorate French units while it is difficult to find decent souvenirs of Wellington and even more so Blücher. Napoleon stuff is everywhere in profusion.³⁴

After Napoleon was sent to an island he could not get off of, King William of the Netherlands set about ruling Belgium as well. The plan was for the Dutch trading economy to “complement” the Belgian manufacturing economy but the plan did not take into account the personality of William. He was “Dutch, Calvinist, and authoritarian.” The Belgians appreciated none of these. The Netherlands favored free trade for its commerce while Belgium wanted protection against British industries. The Netherlands, in one more reversal in the age-old battle between French and Dutch, also imposed Dutch as the official language except in the Walloon districts and favored Dutch, as opposed to Belgian, civil servants even in Belgium. Noted historian Simon Schama observed that “from the very dedicated views of King William it was clear that whatever concessions would be made in using French locally in the Walloon provinces, Dutch/Flemish was to be the proper vehicle of the new schooling and a *sine qua non* for all those who aspired to succeed within it.” William went so far as to establish a new seminary in Liers near

³⁴ Ibid., p. 52- 55; Tour guide at Waterloo; personal visit by the author to Waterloo.

Antwerp to train new teachers. Schama noted that “there was something unmistakably [*sic*] condescending about their missionary dedication to bring education to the benighted.” All this upset both the Walloons and the Francophone Flemish bourgeoisie and elites. William restored the university at Louvain in 1817 but the new university failed to please the Belgians, who considered it “a Protestant Dutch intrusion.” The Dutch, with just over half the population of the Belgians (two million against over three million), got equal representation in the States General. Belgian liberals were offended by the lack of ministerial responsibility. The constitution of the new state enshrined freedom of religion and provided that all ministers, including Catholic priests, would be paid by the state. However, Catholic leaders feared the constitution could be used to ban their public ceremonies. There were other irreconcilable differences. A modern Belgian historian observes that “the historic, social, and cultural development in the North and the South differed so much that it made integration, or even the absorption of the South by the North, impossible.”³⁵

The divorce came in 1830. The leaders of the Belgian revolution were young bourgeois who had high expectations and aspirations but felt excluded by the Dutch regime. Their desire to be part of the political system and to make their voices heard was disappointed by William’s authoritarianism. They included “intellectuals, teachers, wealthy craftsmen, journalists, civil servants, traders, etc [*sic*].” They demanded popular sovereignty (which would have meant Belgian domination of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands because of its greater population), ministerial responsibility, equal access to employment, and freedom of education and the press. In essence, they demanded the late

³⁵ Cook, p. 55; Simon Schama quoted in *Ibid*, p. 56; Cook; *ibid.*; Els Witte, Jan Craebeckx, Alain Meynen, *Political History of Belgium From 1830 onwards*, Raf Casert trans. (Brussels: VUB University Press, 2000), p. 17.

18th century liberal revolutionary agenda. They ran “action groups” and “resistance committees.” They published newspapers and organized protests reaching out to the whole population as well. In November 1828, the liberal and the Catholic parliamentary deputies (who felt a new regime would restore clerical supremacy) agreed to a union. The two sides would cease attacks on the other in the media, would block all legislation until ministerial responsibility was conceded, the high court was moved from the Hague to Brussels, and Belgians got more job opportunities in the civil service, military, and foreign service. Both factions demanded William implement the concordat he negotiated with the Vatican in 1827 and then repudiated in the face of heavy Dutch Protestant opposition. Liberals applauded the restrictions on the Belgian Catholic clergy while the Catholics, initially viewing the concordat unfavorably, resented William’s unilateral rejection of the treaty. In a case of “too little, too late,” William closed his college in Louvain, dropped governmental inspection of Catholic schools, allowed the use of French throughout Belgium, and accepted lifetime tenure for judges. Unfortunately for him, the harvest had been very bad, the economy was stalled, and trade and industry were inert.³⁶

The precipitating event of the Belgian revolution was a performance of the opera *La Muette de Portici* (the Mute Girl of Portici) on August 25, 1830 at the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels. The opera, written by Daniel-François-Esprit Auber in 1828, is set in Naples where Alphonse, the son of the Spanish viceroy, seduces and abandons a mute girl, Fenella, leading to a failed insurrection against Spanish oppression by local fishermen led by Fenella’s brother Masaniello. This opera, and in particular the singing of “*Amour sacré de la Patrie*” (“Sacred love of the fatherland”), sung to the tune of *La*

³⁶ Ibid., p. 19; Cook, p. 57; Witte *et al.*, pp. 19-20; Cook, pp. 57-8.

Marseillaise inspired the audience, already excited by news of the French July Revolution, to take to the streets in revolt against the Dutch occupation. The suffering Brussels working class rose as well, alarming the bourgeois liberal who would have settled for autonomy under William's son the Prince of Orange. Street fighting erupted and the Dutch troops left the city, either driven out by the revolutionaries or departing voluntarily in order to allow negotiations to take place, depending on the historian. However, William was in no mood to discuss concessions while the burghers of Brussels, who might have compromised, had fled the rage of the lower classes who resolutely rejected the royal government. In any case, the six thousand Dutch troops, including three thousand cavalry perfect for encircling the city, failed to fight resolutely the rebels, estimated at no more than seventeen hundred who were, moreover, divided because the merchants and industrialists started to worry about the economic consequences of Belgian independence and because the bourgeoisie worried about anarchy and what they considered excessive lower-class demands. The Dutch troops were able to fight its way into the city "through a 'veritable gauntlet' of snipers" but instead of forcing their way to seize the Grand' Place (the heart of Brussels) and the Royal Palace they paused, allowing the rebels to recover and strengthen their positions. The Dutch missed golden opportunities by not attacking at night while the defenders were enjoying the world-famous Belgian beer. The irresolute Dutch commander, Prince Friedrich, unaware of the rebel weakness, withdrew his troops on the night of September 26-7 after three days of fighting. One historian judged "Frederick [*sic*] was forced to confront the options of either investing the city, bombarding it, or perpetuating negotiations. Never did the Prince realize the fewness of his opponents, nor of their near despair. . . . [Had Frederick

had] one or two more days' patience, Brussels would have dropped like an overripe plum into his hands."³⁷

Once the Dutch left, the bourgeoisie returned and, although they contributed only five percent of the fighters, took charge of the revolution. They set up a provisional government under Charles Rogier which appealed successfully to Belgian soldiers to join their cause. Other Belgian cities rose up and expelled their Dutch garrisons. Independence was declared on October 4 and a national congress was elected to draft a constitution. Either because many did not support a total break with Holland or in protest against the lack of lower-class, opposition, or Pro-Dutch candidates, only two thirds of the 46,000 eligible voters cast ballots. The franchise required paying even more electoral taxes than during King William's reign while the poor and the lower-middle-class, even the revolutionary leaders from that class, were excluded although some could get in by special recognition of their intelligence. This also worked for doctors, lawyers, academics, and priests. The Congress was filled mainly by landed aristocrats and intellectuals "at the expense of wealthy traders, industrialists, bourgeois landowners, and intellectuals." Conservatives and clericals dominated. The vast majority of delegates supported leaving Holland. Meanwhile, the Dutch States-General accepted Belgian autonomy and sent Prince William to Antwerp to either act as Dutch governor-general of Belgium or king of independent Belgium should the rebels offer their throne to him. Prince William proclaimed Belgian independence and allowed voting for the national congress in Antwerp and Limburg provinces. He was then undercut by his father the king

³⁷ Cook, p. 58; "Murette de Portici, La," http://www.naxos.com/NewDesign/fintro.files/bintro.files/operas/Murette_de_Portici_La; Cook, p. 58 for the first interpretation, Witte *et al.*, p. 20 for the second; Cook, pp. 58-9; John W. Rooney quoted in *ibid.*, p. 59.

who, in order to avoid alienating the Dutch or encouraging the Catholics of Dutch Brabant to join their southern neighbors, withdrew the Prince's powers. Belgian volunteers entered Antwerp on October 27 and fought the Dutch troops, who had pulled back to their fortress. The Dutch artillery, the outlying fortifications, and eight frigates in the harbor then shelled the city. This action severed any last ties of kinship between the north and the south.³⁸

Other powers were watching this struggle and, disappointed by King William's lack of resolute action, stepped in to avert feared anarchy. The British, who had the greatest strategic interest in the Low Countries and who especially wanted to keep Belgium out of French hands, took the lead. France, which for the opposite reason had supported the revolution, followed the British because King Louis Philippe was busy consolidating his own power and did not want a new adventure. Russia was engaged in brutally suppressing a Polish revolt (the Lithuanians would join in the next year) while Prussia was still buried under its war debts. Those two powers also backed the British. They all also wanted to keep the problem localized. They concluded the optimal solution was to create an independent and neutral state that could fulfill the role of buffer. Moreover, many European decision-makers were liberals who looked approvingly on their Belgian counterparts. The European Powers declared an armistice on November 4 and six days later the Belgian Congress deposed the House of Orange while accepting in principle the idea of constitutional monarchy. On December 20 the Powers officially recognized the dissolution of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. A month later they recognized Belgian independence. The Belgian Congress threw a wrench into the works

³⁸ Ibid., p. 60; Witte *et al.*, p. 21; Cook, p. 60; Witte *et al.*, p. 21.

by choosing a son of Louis Philippe as king. Not surprisingly this choice was not acceptable to the British and the French gave in and rejected the offer.³⁹

The Belgian constitution represented “a compromise between the landowners and clergy on the one hand and the liberal middle class on the other.” Societal changes were grudgingly accepted by the former and restrained by the latter. The document was based on the English constitution although the former “laid the groundwork for the dominance of the urban bourgeoisie and fell short of the democratic aspirations of many of those whose struggle in the streets led to the defeat of the Dutch.” It called for a limited constitutional monarchy, the balance of power between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, ministerial responsibility, and ministerial countersignature (except during wartime) for any laws or royal decrees. It enshrined the liberal values of political freedom and self-determination as well as a free-market economy with a parliamentary system “to make sure those rights continued to prevail.” The parliament would be bicameral. Although the constitution eliminated the chamber reserved for the aristocracy, it provided for an upper house, the Senate, to be filled only by those who could pay a tax fifty times higher than the minimum electoral tax, thus ensuring the power there of the rich landowners. The lower house, the Chamber of Representatives, also had an electoral tax, of twenty guilders. As opposed to the franchise for the National Congress, the constitution provided no loopholes for the intellectually gifted, “[s]o property was the liberal citizen’s only guarantee to safeguard his political freedom. The constitutional concept of equality existed only in as far as it did not threaten the position of the ruling powers.” The Catholics and moderate liberals enacted the separation of Church and State while granting the Church “an expansion of religious services and, at the same time,

³⁹ Witte *et al.*, p. 20; Cook, pp. 60-1.

charity and education were exempt from state controls.” The state paid clerical salaries but the Church was forced to accept freedom of expression. “It is tough to overestimate this constitutional provision. It was a rejection of the Constantine notion that united Catholicism, morals, law and order into one inseparable whole. It opened the constitutional door to the secular society even though this prospect was far from a realistic one in Belgium, especially after the revolution.”⁴⁰

The monarch chosen to rule the newly independent nation was the “talented and able” Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, a minor German state, who was related to the British royal family. Leopold’s prompt marriage to the daughter of Louis Philippe helped appease the French. Leopold was supported inside Belgium because he was known to be favorable to conservative, Catholic, and capitalist interests.⁴¹

All was not yet smooth sailing for Belgium. King William of Holland was dissatisfied with the solution imposed by the European powers and was determined to reverse it. He was inspired by pro-Orange revolts in Ghent and Antwerp and two days after Leopold’s coronation on August 2, 1831, he sent troops to retake his lost southern provinces. His troops initially defeated the Belgians, who called on French aid. The French soldiers drove the Dutch back in ten days and promptly withdrew to avoid antagonizing the British, who still did not want to see a French presence in the new country. The defeat of the Belgian forces led the Powers at the London Conference to impose a tougher arrangement on Belgium than they had originally enacted. In the Treaty of the XXIV Articles Belgium was stripped of parts of Limburg and Luxembourg. Belgium was also saddled with more than its share of the divided national debt of the

⁴⁰ Witte, *et al.*, pp. 20-1; Cook, p. 61; Witte, *et al.*, pp. 22-3, 26.

⁴¹ Cook, p. 61; Witte, *et al.*, pp. 22.

United Kingdom of the Netherlands, as well as customs duty on the Scheldt River, controlled by Holland, which fed Antwerp. Although the Belgians, recognizing their unfavorable position, signed the treaty, King William did not and refused to evacuate his troops from Antwerp (as the Belgian hawks demanded) or fortresses on the Scheldt while the Belgians refused to evacuate Limburg or Luxembourg. The Dutch were driven out by a French army supported by a joint Anglo-French fleet and on May 21, 1833 were forced to accept an indefinite armistice with favorable treatment for Belgium *vis-à-vis* Holland and the lifting of the Allied blockade of the Scheldt for as long as William refused to settle. This mollified the hawks in the Belgian parliamentary opposition. The democratic republican forces, especially those of the lower-middle-classes who had had such an impact on the revolution, quickly saw that they and their ideas would be shut out of power by the new constitution. Already in 1831, they planned to rectify that by means of a republican coup, which failed miserably. "It proved to be the last attempt to give the new regime a more republican and democratic outlook." There was also an anti-independence opposition. In the main, it was Orangist and desired continued union with Holland. In Wallonia, the opposition took the form of demands for reunion with France. These groups rejected involvement in parliamentary action because that would mean collaboration with the new state. "Reunionism was a pipe dream of the Walloon Francophiles" and they gave up when Leopold of Saxe-Coburg was chosen as king. The Orangists, however, drew support from anti-clericals who approved of William's offensive against Catholicism in Belgium. As well, many nobles and members of the court supported William. This resistance was essentially limited to the highest strata of society and did not move beyond the cities. When King William was forced to sign the

Treaty of the XXIV Articles, the Orangist opposition crumbled and its members joined the Liberals to continue the fight against political Catholicism.⁴²

As time went on, Belgium's international position improved and in March 1838 William offered to sign the Treaty of the XXIV Articles. Protests against the loss of parts of the two provinces broke out all over Belgium while King Leopold and the parliament tried to negotiate a better treaty. The British and the French did not support their claims and were not interested in going to war so that Belgium could keep all of these provinces even though the residents of the part of Limburg which went to Holland wanted to stay with Belgium. Nor did many sectors of Belgian society desire a new conflict. On April 19, 1839, the Treaty was signed and William accepted the division of his country. Belgium now existed as a sovereign state among other sovereign states. Moreover, its perpetual neutrality was guaranteed by the European powers, including Prussia.⁴³

The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, which had belonged to William since the Congress of Vienna, also rose up in 1830 and wanted to join Belgium. "The Luxembourgers. . . abhorred kippered herrings, had difficulty pronouncing Dutch consonants and were fed up walking around in crumpled foreign uniforms. . . ." The Prussian garrison established by the Congress maintained order and the Grand Duchy was divided with the French-speakers in the west going to Belgium and the Lettisch (Luxembourgeois) becoming independent but ruled by King William of Holland. By

⁴² Cook, p. 62; Witte, *et al.*, pp. 24-7.

⁴³ Witte *et al.*, pp. 24-5; Cook, p. 62.

1867, the Luxembourgers “had become independent, neutral, and broken down the walls of the fortress [of Luxembourg City]. The Prussian soldiers left in disgust.”⁴⁴

Belgium’s constitution made the Belgians the freest people in Europe at the time although there were limits. The richest sections of society kept a stranglehold on power by limiting the franchise to ten percent of the male population until 1894 while only the affluent could run for the Senate. Workers lacked the rights to organize or to strike. The Belgian government felt empowered to regulate freedom of the press, as it did in 1851 when the French émigré press in Belgium inveighed against Louis Napoleon.⁴⁵

Two parliamentary groups (they were not yet parties) dominated the politics of independent Belgium and indeed ruled jointly until the late 1840s. These were the liberals and the Catholics. Belgium was unique at this time for having Catholics cooperating in a government that did not have Catholicism as the official religion and the Pope and foreign Catholics condemned the Belgians. “Time proved the Belgian Catholics right and the Catholic conservatives, who carped from a distance without understanding Belgium, wrong.” The Belgian Catholic church profited from the freedoms enshrined in the new constitution. Freedom of religion allowed the Church to develop without governmental interference; freedom of education allowed the formation of a wide network of parochial schools; freedom of association permitted the reformation of religious orders and Church organizations. The Church thus regained the ground lost under the French revolutionaries and the Dutch Calvinists.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Cook, p. 62; George Erasmus, *How to Remain what you Are: Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Luxembourg but Nobody Ever Told You*, 7th ed., illustrations by Alison Koch-Kent (Luxembourg?: NP 2000), pp. 63-66.

⁴⁵ Cook, p. 64.

⁴⁶ Cook, pp. 63-4.

For their part, the liberals, although many of them were Catholic, some even practicing Catholics, supported the separation of church and state. They differed with the Catholics on church subsidies, church control over education, and a political role for the Church (the liberals opposed all three). Many had purchased Church properties under the French and feared a Catholic regime would force them to return the property. Many were also Freemasons who resented the Church's campaign against Freemasonry and who thus "brought to the Liberal Party an added dimension of ideological opposition to the Catholic Church." Nevertheless, the liberals found themselves subsidizing Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish groups in the name of cooperation.⁴⁷

Brussels, the capital of the new state, kept advancing. Upon its entry into revolutionary France, the old walls of the city were destroyed, to be replaced by boulevards. In 1819 Brussels became the first city in Europe to have gas streetlights. Development continued apace in order to give the city an appearance consonant with its new status. Slums were eradicated and the Senne River covered. The first passenger rail line on the Continent was established between Brussels and Mechelen (on the Meuse) in 1835. Eleven years later, the still striking Galeries Saint-Hubert, the first "glass-arcaded shopping center" was opened just steps from the Grand' Place.⁴⁸

During this time, Leopold was busy attempting to expand royal power at the expense of the parliament. By means of "pocket vetoes and royal decrees," he was fairly successful, "giving to the Belgian monarchy the interventionist character, which it possessed until the Second World War." Leopold's power grab was made possible by the bourgeoisie who appreciated the king's "hands off" policy when it came to their making

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 63-4; Patricia Carson, cited in Ibid., p. 63.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 64-5.

money. Indeed, it was a very good time for them to make profits because industrialization was continuing apace, spurred on by the creation of a huge rail net, leading to increased self-confidence and the bourgeois imprint on all aspects of Belgian life. Many Belgian bourgeois either married into or were ennobled into the aristocracy. The iron industry around Liège was particularly booming, with the factories being powered by the coal mines in Hainaut. Unfortunately, the prosperity did not filter down to the Belgian workers who continued to suffer, working up to twelve hours with only a half-hour break or fourteen hours with two half-hour breaks and one hour break. Boys as young as twelve (and sometimes even younger) worked in the mines around Liège while young boys and girls (also as young as twelve) toiled for eight to twelve hours a day in the mines around Mons. Things got even worse for the workers in the “Hungry Forties” as Flanders was socked with a decline of the linen industry and then hammered with “an agricultural and industrial crisis” in 1845. Fifteen thousand Flemings died of starvation between 1846 and 1848 while tens of thousands of others died of cholera and typhus. Flemish towns responded by subsidizing grain for bakeries, distributing bread and potatoes, or establishing soup kitchens. The Belgian lower classes were still suffering in 1848.⁴⁹

In 1842, the Church got a law allowing them to control public elementary education and requiring religious education in all schools. This law, with the clerical condemnation of the Masons in 1836, led to an anti-clerical opposition to Church, agricultural, and industrial domination of Belgian politics. Free-traders resented Church control over land and cottage industries while democrats and secularists naturally did not see eye to eye with the conservative Catholics. Bourgeois individualists opposed church authority. This opposition had no problem with the Church as long as it stayed out of

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 65; Witte, *et al.*, p. 36; Cook, pp. 67-71.

politics. Its first act was the establishment in 1834 of the Free University of Brussels in opposition to the Catholic University of Louvain. By 1836 a party organization was building. After 1840, the Orangists, finally abandoning their dream of reunion with Holland, joined the opposition although Orangists had been forming coalitions with the liberals since 1836. The democrats, who reached out to the lower classes and supported the gradual expansion of the electorate and the amelioration of the lives of poor people, joined the liberal opposition the next year. The Masons were also active in the opposition. By 1841, many locations had local party units and in 1846 the first Liberal Congress met in Brussels to establish a binding platform.

The speed and efficiency with which these diverse groups were turned into a tightly structured party was a combination of several factors. The liberals had fearless leaders and cunning organizers within their ranks. . . . [Brussels and] other cities had their own liberal heroes and they all had one thing in common: they knew how to mobilize the disgruntled but inert liberal electorate and lead prospective voters right into their local party offices.⁵⁰

In 1847, Leopold, who opposed the formation of political parties as threats to his power, was faced for the first time with a government he did not choose. The newly-minted Liberals won an overwhelming majority and formed a government under Charles Rogier. The Liberals rolled back the Catholic gains, abolishing clerical control over public education and giving the government schools the wherewithal to compete against the Catholic institutions. Rail and canal construction were increased to spur the economy and provide employment. At the same time the electoral tax was reduced to its lowest constitutional level and soothing words were said to the lower classes. However, this government had just taken office when, in February 1848, revolution broke out in Paris as Louis-Philippe was driven off his throne and the sparks flew throughout Europe. Except

⁵⁰ Witte, *et al.*, pp 37-8.

into Belgium although, on February 26, Leopold, alarmed and depressed at the fall of his father-in-law, offered his resignation to the Belgian government, who turned it down. Very little of a revolutionary nature actually took place. Some radical newspapers demanded a republic and there were some student demonstrations in Louvain. Six thousand Belgian guest workers in France were armed by the French revolutionaries and sent to invade Belgium but they were dispersed by the regular Belgian army. The civil guard, put on alert by Prime Minister Rogier, did not even need to be called out. 1848 was “a disaster” for the democrats who saw their support dwindle and who were abandoned by the petit bourgeoisie and social progressives who opposed the democratic dreams of a republican revolution. The Liberals, on the other hand, emerged from the European revolution as champions who had won the support of the entire parliament and more tightly united the social conservatives. New elections gave the Liberals absolute majorities in both chambers of the Belgian parliament and the Liberals would go on, with one brief intermission, to dominate Belgian politics until 1884.⁵¹

Leopold I died in 1865, succeeded by his son, Leopold II. Like his father, who had repulsed a Prussian attempt to draw his realm into the *Zollverein* (the Prussian-dominated German customs union) and a French essay under Napoleon III aimed at drawing Belgium into a customs union, Leopold II had to ward off threats to the land. After Austria was humbled by Prussia, the rising power in Europe, in 1866, Napoleon III sought to increase his power to counter that of Prussia. He thought to annex Wallonia to his Second Empire. That plan did not pan out, nor did his attempt to take Luxembourg, which was blocked by Otto von Bismarck, the Prussian chancellor. Meanwhile, royal and governmental attempts to build up the army and its fortifications were blocked by the

⁵¹ Witte *et al.*, pp. 43-4; Cook, pp. 65-6; Witte *et al.*, p. 43.

progressive movement, which had developed in the 1860s among the middle classes which had received the vote after 1848. These were joined by the lower-middle-classes who remained disenfranchised but wanted their fair share of political power and could get it only by attacking the governing class. They demanded the franchise on the basis of their education and they championed education as the means of bringing the lower classes into the political process (eventually). They were capitalists who saw in free trade a way to “undermine the privileges of the wealthy.” They supported class integrationism to calm the upper classes and prevent the lower classes drifting towards socialism.⁵²

Belgium was hit by a long depression that would span the 1870s, ‘80s, and ‘90s while at the same time its industrial revolution was “maturing.” The result of this confluence was a dramatic change in Belgian society and politics. Ordinary Belgians “became involved in national politics on a continuing basis in contrast to their earlier involvement, which was short-lived and often limited to the members of a single trade and town.” The depression loosened the Liberal hold on power and the Catholics, who had been organizing a party structure in 1865, won a parliamentary majority in 1870. The Catholics in power kept to economic free-market policies and refused to expand Catholic political power or attack their “freedom of thought.” The minority Ultramontanists tried to force through measures giving the Church control over all aspects of life. They appealed to the lower classes but wanted to bring back a “medieval class structure” with the parliament replaced by a class-based estates system. They increased their efforts in the 1870s when they received support from Pope Pius IX. His death and replacement by a new pope who counseled the Ultramontanists to accept the Belgian constitution led to the

⁵² Cook, p. 77; Jeremy D. Popkin, *A History of Modern France*, 2nd edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), p. 128; Witte, *et al.*, pp. 59-60.

demise of the Ultramontanists and the acceptance of the liberal state by almost all Belgian Catholics.⁵³

Others in the working class to whom political Catholicism did not appeal turned to socialism. The First International Workingmen's Association spread to Belgium, where it was represented by the *Association Internationale des Travailleurs*. The first mass strikes in Belgium took place in the 1850s and in 1866 the government repealed some anti-labor articles in the Belgian constitution and legalized strikes and unions although a new article provided for harsh punishment for hassling workers who chose not to participate in strikes in their workplace. Nevertheless, troops clashed with strikers in 1868 and the depression which hit in 1873 led to a dramatic increase in strikes. The Belgian Workers' Party (*Partie Ouvrière Belge*) was founded in 1885 and soon supplanted the Liberals as the chief anti-Catholic option. It became the largest party in parliament in 1894 although unionization lagged far behind that in Britain or Germany. The historian Bernard A. Cook notes "the organization of Belgian workers was difficult because they were largely illiterate and remarkably repressed and exploited." As opposed to Britain, industrialization in Belgium did not reduce poverty and Belgian workers continued to work long hours for low pay. Many women and children still worked. Among the socialist demands were demands for the improvement of working conditions and universal manhood suffrage. Their strikes bore fruit in 1889 when laws were passed (implemented only in 1892) banning boys under ten and all females from underground work although those women who were already working underground got to continue to do so. In 1893, in the face of a general strike, the socialists won universal manhood suffrage but it was not yet one man-one vote; votes were weighted by "age, income,

⁵³ Cook, pp. 78; Witte, *et al.*, pp. 65-7.

education, and marital status.” All men over twenty-four got one vote. Those over thirty-four with families and property taxes got a second vote while professionals and owners of large properties got a third. Forty percent of Belgian men had more than one vote. The change benefited the socialists and Catholics at the polls while the Liberals, who appealed to the urban bourgeoisie, lost strength. However, in 1899, proportional representation was enacted “to protect minorities” and allowed the Liberals back into power by means of a coalition with the socialists, which demanded one man-one vote. This last was not received until after World War One.⁵⁴

Two of Belgium’s three parties became identified with one or the other major Belgian ethnic groups. The Socialists, whose base of power was in industrialized Wallonia, became identified with the Walloons while the Catholics represented the more religious and peasant Flemings although all three parties had Flemish and Walloon wings. The Belgian revolution had declared French to be the official language and although the Belgian nationalists tried to create a synthesized unique Belgian culture their decision to use French as the vehicle of this culture ultimately led to a split between the Walloons and the Flemings, whose cultural nationalism started in the early days of the Belgian state and was represented most outstandingly by Hendrik Conscience, whose novel *Lion of Flanders* (1839) “inspired the Flemish flag and anthem and popularized Jan Breidel and Pieter de Coninck, the leaders of the workers of Bruges at the Battle of the Golden Spurs in 1302, as Flemish national heroes.” In 1856 the Belgian government established a Flemish Grievance Commission, which, three years later, recommended Flanders be bi-lingual with individuals allowed to use either language in public life. The Walloons rejected this solution while the Flemish fought for the right to interact with the

⁵⁴ Cook, pp. 86-7.

state in Flemish in the Flemish areas of the state. A political Flemish nationalism arose which wanted Flanders to be home for the Flemish where they could speak their own language. In 1898, Flemish was recognized as an official language and in 1913 the Flemish earned the right to use Flemish in with local authorities, including school authorities. The next year, a law provided for education in the mother language in primary schools. The Flemish political demands included linguistic equality and almost nobody spoke about secession or union with Holland.⁵⁵

Outside of Belgium, imperialism was in full flood in the mid-19th century. King Leopold II was “an enthusiastic imperialist.” He, and like-minded Belgians, saw colonies as a means to offset Belgium’s limited extent, a market for Belgian industries, and food and space for Belgians. Leopold quickly abandoned the latter goal in favor of getting filthy rich. In 1876, Leopold founded and funded the International Association for the Exploration and Civilization of Central Africa. Ostensibly formed to fight the slave trade, it acted as the vehicle for Belgian colonization of Africa. In 1877 and 1879 the Belgians established their first posts on Lake Tanganyika in East Africa while in 1878 was created the Committee for the Study of the Upper Congo which hired the famed explorer Henry M. Stanley to put up posts in the Congo, swapping uniforms and alcohol with the local chiefs (who did not understand western ideas of land ownership) in exchange for their realms. Thus Leopold bought a huge swath of Africa for which he wanted international recognition. In 1882 he reorganized the Committee for the Study of the Upper Congo as the International Association of the Congo. Two years later the United States of America recognized the International Association as the *de jure* ruler of the Congo while the same year the Berlin Conference on the Congo (as part of a general division of the world

⁵⁵ Cook, pp. 81-4; Witte, *et al.* p. 98.

between the European powers) “recognized the International Association as the Independent State of the Congo or ‘Congo Free State.’” In 1885, Leopold was declared the ruler of the state. Leopold held it as a personal possession, not a Belgian colony, while most of the land was owned by the king. “[T]he fiction that Belgium had nothing to do with Leopold’s private affairs was very carefully upheld” despite the fact that he had used Belgian diplomats to help him get international recognition of his claim. The Belgian parliament refused any role in running the venture. The Belgian Congo and its ruler Leopold has become infamous for the vicious exploitation of the area and of its natives who were compelled either by force or by the taking of women and children as hostages to work for the enrichment of the king, for instance, to collect rubber for the Anglo-Belgian Indian Rubber Company. The Congolese had to pay a “rubber tax” and were given a work quota. Death or hand amputation awaited those Congolese who dared to oppose Leopold’s authority. The king used profits from his exploitation of the Congo to pay for urban development and beautification programs all over Belgium. There were some Belgians who were appalled at Leopold’s treatment of the Congolese and in 1904, Edmund Morel, a worker at a Liverpool shipping company who “was initially struck by the fact that ships arriving at Ostend from the Congo were full of ivory and rubber, but that they did not bring commodities back to the Congo. Instead, they were filled with weapons and soldiers,” founded the Congo Reform Association in Great Britain. He, and others like him, were so successful that in 1906 the Belgian Parliament took control over the Congo from the king and in 1908 the official transferal took place although Leopold got to keep his profits. Parliamentary control did not ameliorate the condition of the Congolese because the king and the minister of colonies continued to “dominate”

colonial policy. Estimates of the toll on the Congolese range from one million dead to ten million but one author, who supports the higher number, observes that “[t]he Belgians weren’t imperialists; they did not want an empire. The Congo was about one man who wanted money. That’s what made it so bad. The state’s only purpose was to collect rubber. The king didn’t want to exterminate people; he wanted them to work for him.”⁵⁶

Leopold II died in 1909 and was replaced by his young nephew Albert I. On his deathbed, Leopold signed the Militia Law of 1909 that eliminated the system which drafted men by lot but provided that a draftee could hire a substitute and instituted obligatory service for one son per family. Under Albert, obligatory military service was introduced in 1913. It was hoped that this measure would bring the size of the army up to 340,000 men from the 180,000 provided by the 1909 law. Unfortunately, in 1914 the Belgian Army would be nowhere near this number, coming in at about 200,000 with 120,000 in the field army. Albert and his prime minister Charles de Broqueville disagreed on strategy to such an extent that it retarded military decision-making with the result that when Albert faced his greatest test (except, perhaps, for the mountain that would eventually spell his death) in 1914 there was still no plan for how to deal with a German invasion despite two years of warnings. Indeed, the government had given so little clue as to its plans that people conjectured the “very weak” Belgian Army “would be instructed to make some appropriate gestures and then to withdraw or to capitulate.” Belgium, invasion route 1A in Western Europe, featured prominently in the German plans drawn up by the German Chief of the General Staff Alfred von Schlieffen for war with France. His plan, later scaled down by his successor von Moltke the younger, called for a massive

⁵⁶ Cook, pp. 84-6; Kossmann, pp. 382-3, also quoted in Cook, p. 85; Adam Hochschild cited in *ibid.*, Chapter 12, ff. 53; Jules Marchal quoted in *ibid.*, p. 86.

German wheeling movement through Belgium and southern Holland (Holland was exempted by von Moltke) swinging around west of Paris and trapping the French armies against the Franco-German border. In 1900 the German Foreign Office informed von Schlieffen that it would have to accept strategic necessity and justify the violation of Belgian neutrality rather than to prevent it. For their part, the Belgians, who were not privy to the German plans, felt that their army had been strong enough, when combined with a British guarantee of Belgian neutrality, to dissuade both combatants in the Franco-Prussian War from using Belgian territory and hoped that it would still perform that function when tensions erupted in the Summer of 1914 after the assassination by ethnic Serbs of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne. On July 29, the German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg assured the British, whom he was hoping to keep neutral in the coming war, that Germany would respect Belgian territorial integrity, if not specifically its neutrality. On July 31, British Foreign Secretary Edward Grey asked both France and Germany to respect Belgian neutrality. The French agreed but the Germans did not. That same day, after the German Kaiser declared *Kriegsgefahr Zustand* (“Threatening Danger of War”) which would automatically lead to German mobilization, reports arrived in Brussels of French troop transports heading to the German border, and the Netherlands mobilized, Belgium called up its troops. On August 1, the Germans, “having by then forgotten that Luxembourg was neutral, came marching in once more and proved their great ability for staging a Blitzkrieg in undefended territories.” The next day, Germany, already at war with Russia, handed, via its ambassador in Brussels, to Belgian Foreign Minister Davignon an ultimatum demanding free passage through Belgium for German troops. The Germans argued (untruthfully) that the French were

preparing an invasion of Germany via Belgium. If Belgium did not resist, it would be reconstituted after the war; if it did resist, it would be treated as an enemy. It took the Cabinet one hour to reject the ultimatum although it could not agree on what the consequences of this rejection were. On August 3, the Belgians made their refusal known to the Germans. On August 4 German soldiers crossed the frontier. King Albert made a stirring speech to the Parliament in which he embodied Belgian “determination” to resist. In the Reichstag (German parliament), Chancellor von Bethmann-Hollweg made a speech declaring that Russia had driven Germany into a defensive war and justifying the German invasion of Belgium as a preemptive measure against a French attack. He admitted that Germany had acted badly (“we shall try to make up for this injustice—I speak this openly—this injustice we are committing, once our military aims have been accomplished”) but, in a statement that would haunt him, declared that “necessity knows no law.” Britain, who could not afford to see the Belgian coast fall into enemy hands, demanded Germany withdraw by midnight. When the deadline passed without result, Britain entered the war alongside the *Entente* nations of France and Russia and the associated nations of Serbia and Belgium.⁵⁷

The historian E. H. Kossmann notes some disadvantages under which the Belgian Army operated: The ruling Catholic Party opposed military spending and did not want to degrade Belgian youth through barracks life. Moreover, most Belgians disliked the army and branded a “militarist” anybody who urged improving it. However, he also observes

⁵⁷ Lt. Gen. Albert Crahay, *L'Armée belge entre les deux guerres* (Brussels: Louis Musin, 1978), p. 9; Liliane and Fred Funcken, *L'Uniforme et les armes des soldats de la guerre 1914-1918*, Vol. 1, *Infanterie-Blindés-Aviation* (Tournai, Belgium: Casterman, 1970), p. 26; Kossmann, pp. 518-19; Cook, pp. 77, 91; Brigadier General and Army historian S.L.A. Marshall observed that “the [Austro-Hungarian] Emperor could not imagine that the major nations of Europe would shortly be destroying their wealth and their manhood because of the carelessness of his own nephew in getting shot.” S.L.A. Marshall, *The American Heritage History of World War I* (NY: Dell, 1964), p. 25; Cook, p. 91; Marshall, p. 50; Kossmann, p. 520; Erasmus, p. 70; Kossmann, *ibid.*, Cook, p. 92; Kossmann, p. 521; Cook, *ibid.*

“the problem may have been insoluble anyhow, for even with a well-organized army the Belgians could not have held out against German troops for very long.” The Belgian Army, excepting some 25,000 troops holding the forts around the strategically vital city of Liège, which dominated the corridor between the Dutch Limburg border and the French border, was organized into seven divisions with no reserves to come. Most Belgian troops had fired only one rifle round a week in training and the army was desperately short of machine-guns and of field guns to support the Liège forts and control the gaps between them (the parliament refused to grant the funds for the field guns). Opposing them were 60,000 men in the spearhead of the German invasion. The first Belgian resistance was put up by six gendarmes in the border town of Visé. The German “tide” swiftly overcame them and flowed up to the twelve forts and four hundred guns of the “Fortified Position of Liège” (Position Fortifiée de Liège), which, supported by the Third army division reinforced by a brigade of the Fourth army division (for a total of about 47,500 men) was only expected to delay the Germans. This they did extraordinarily well. They blew the bridges over the Meuse River above and below the city and dominated the heights on both banks of the water. The Belgian commander, General Gérard Matthieu Leman had received a “hold to the end” order from his king and took it seriously. He rejected German surrender demands and the Germans were “astonished” when on August 5 their first attempt to cross the Meuse on pontoon boats came to naught while the Liège guns hammered the central divisions of the German attack. A charge straight into Belgian machine guns was shredded and the German commander, General Otto von Emmich, pulled his troops back. However, a nearly unknown German colonel of fusiliers who was separated from his unit, Erich Ludendorff, directed a cavalry unit

around the rear of the Belgian positions. Although the threat was “more hollow than real,” General Leman sent his mobile troops to join the main body of the Belgian Army behind the Gette river. This opened the areas between the forts to German soldiers. Then the commander of the German Fourteenth brigade was killed by shrapnel. Ludendorff replaced him and led his troops into the inner citadel of Liège. The forts around the city still held out but Ludendorff achieved fame for having taken the city. On August 10, the Germans took Fort Barchon from the rear, allowing them to bring up “Germany’s first surprise weapon—the 420mm siege guns” that penetrated the armor of the forts and destroyed them one by one. On August 16, General Leman, in the sole fort still resisting, Fort Loncin, rejected a German demand for surrender and soon the fort was destroyed after a German shell exploded Loncin’s ammunition magazine. Leman was dragged out unconscious from the wreckage and taken prisoner. He became a hero for his courage and devotion to orders. He insisted the German commander include a note that he had been captured while unconscious. The fierce Belgian resistance delayed the German advance for one or two days and “had palpable effects in the development of the German campaign” but, perhaps more important, “gave the Allies. . . a cause and an example.”⁵⁸

The German forces, about 200,000 men, continued on from Liège to fight the main body of the Belgian forces on the Gette in front of Louvain and Brussels. The Belgians were outnumbered four or five to one and the Anglo-French forces were nowhere to be found. A smaller German force was reportedly on its way to reduce the Fortified Position of Namur in western Belgium, which fell on August 25. On August 18, Albert withdrew the army to the Fortified Position of Antwerp. The Army reached

⁵⁸ Kossmann, p. 517; Marshall, pp. 67-8 Funcken, p. 28; Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (NY: Ballantine, 1994), p. 192; Kossmann, p. 521; Tuchman, p. 193.

Antwerp on August 20, the same day the Germans took Brussels. At this point, the field army and the troops manning the “out of date and unfinished” fortifications totaled some 150,000 men. The Germans, aiming for Paris, left Antwerp alone for a time. On August 25, a Belgian counterattack out of Antwerp liberated the city of Mechelen, which “provided significant assistance to the British and French. It helped to ease German pressure at Mons and along the Sambre because it led the Germans to commit four reserve divisions and Landwehr [second-line reserves] to the Antwerp front.” Another Belgian sally on September 9, during the Battle of the Marne further south, kept three German divisions from moving south to intervene. On September 28, the Germans turned their attention to the city. The Belgians, supported by 2,000 British Royal Marines and sailors who had had to march overland from Belgian ports because the Dutch, who controlled the mouth of the Scheldt, considered allowing the British to bring troops directly to Antwerp by sea to be a violation of their neutrality, stood firm at first but the city fell on October 10. The British had delayed the fall of the city for a few days and then covered the Belgian retreat to the Yser River. Thirty-three thousand Belgian and British soldiers, again refused the use of the Scheldt, had to cross into Holland where they were interned. During this campaign the British launched perhaps the first ever strategic bombing raid, from an airfield near Antwerp, when they destroyed a Zeppelin on an airfield near Düsseldorf. Ghent fell to the Germans on October 12, Bruges two days later, and Ostend on October 15. The exhausted Belgian forces, whittled down to about 60,000 men, along with British and French troops withstood a fierce German attack against their Yser River positions from October 18 to October 26, after which the Belgians opened the sluice gates at Nieuport, creating a soggy and impenetrable

marshland between them and the Germans. Two hundred and fifty square miles were all that remained of “Free Belgium.” King Albert, commander of the Belgian Army, refused to leave Belgian soil and maintained his headquarters in the small town of La Panne. His government had fled to France and disagreed with the King on war goals and policy. Albert sought a compromise peace and to keep his army independent and on Belgian soil while the Government was committed to the Entente powers. The Belgian positions remained essentially the same for the next four years. The Belgian troops, “crowded together along a lake of stagnant and putrid water,” lacking clean water but over-provided with rats, were ravaged by disease to the extent that one third of the Belgian soldiers fallen on the Yser front died of disease, as opposed to a disease death rate of one-sixth on the rest of the Western Front. By 1918, the Belgian Army, having gained new recruits from the small slice of Belgium remaining to it and from those who had managed to flee the German occupation, had grown to about 170,000 men. Albert, commander of the Flanders Army Group under French Generalissimo Ferdinand Foch, led his forces in the September 27, 1918 Allied offensive that liberated his country and he marched into Brussels on November 22, 1918.⁵⁹

No discussion of either Belgium in World War One or of Belgian policy in the interwar period, which was dominated by the desire to keep Belgium out of another war, would be complete without a discussion of German atrocious behavior in occupied Belgium. German atrocities began on August 4, 1914, *the very first day of the invasion!* German troops, angered at Belgian resistance in the town of Visé, including the destruction of the bridge over the Meuse river above Liège, accused the Belgians of being

⁵⁹ Kossmann, p. 521; Tuchman, pp. 221-2; Cook, pp. 94-5, 108; Kossmann, *ibid.*; Cook, pp. 95-7; Funcken, p. 34.

francs tireurs, civilian snipers outlawed by the laws of war, and started burning houses, shooting into windows, and shooting or bayoneting Belgian civilians, seven of whom died. This was not an isolated incident and by August 8 there had been twenty-one separate incidents in which ten or more Belgian civilians were murdered. In this period, 850 Belgian civilians were killed and 1,300 buildings had been deliberately destroyed.⁶⁰

The Germans also stole large sums of money disguised as “war levies.” Fifty Belgian civilians taking refuge in a church in Schaffen were executed, over six hundred were killed around Dinant, and, on August 23, “between 150 and 200 civilians” were killed in Leffe. The total civilian loss of life at the hands of the Germans was about 5,500.⁶¹

The most egregious and the most internationally known German atrocity was the destruction of the world-famous university town of Louvain, sixteen miles east of Brussels. It was known for its Gothic architecture, its beer, lace, and church ornaments. It also housed Belgium’s “most influential” university with a 300 year old library housing 230,000 books of which 800 were irreplaceable ancient works. The Germans entered the town on August 19 after the local Belgian Civic Guard had, in accordance with instructions, disbanded and sent its weapons to Antwerp. German forces marched through without hindrance but took important locals hostage just in case. On August 25 the Germans were shaken by the Belgian sally out of Antwerp coming as close as six miles to Louvain. German forces left the town to support their comrades and when they came back the shooting started. Perhaps started by nervous sentries, it spread to the whole city, particularly to the “fashionable quarter.” German soldiers were shooting and killing each

⁶⁰ Zuckerman, pp. 22-3.

⁶¹ Cook, p. 102.

other in error while they torched any houses they suspected of hiding Belgian *francs tireurs*. The fire spread to the university library and little bits of manuscripts floated on the breeze. The fires lasted another three days while shooting and looting continued “sporadically.” In response to world-wide condemnation of a crime against humanity and culture the Germans repeated the unfounded allegations of Belgian civilian sniping as part of a Belgo-British plan to retake the city. Six hundred and fifty Belgian civilians, including many women and children, were deported to Germany. Most were returned in a week but some spend up to five months in Germany, “exhibited like beasts at every station.”⁶²

On August 26, the Germans installed Field Marshal Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz as Governor General of Belgium with a Doctor von Sandt as chief of civil administration. Von der Goltz was soon shipped to Turkey to be replaced by General Freiherr von Bissing, who died in 1917 to be replaced by General Alexander von Falkenhausen. Belgium was placed under martial law but Belgian civil servants remained at their posts at the behest of the Belgian government. “The Germans attempted to keep the Belgians isolated and uninformed. Belgian civilians had to have a permit in order to move about. . . . The use of telephone and telegraph were forbidden. Communication with the outside world was only permitted through letters handled and censored by the Germans.” In October 1915, the Germans began drafting Belgian civilians to work for the military. In May 1916 the Germans stopped the Belgian National Committee for Relief and Alimentation, whose goal was to eliminate unemployment. The Germans felt the Committee was hindering their recruitment of Belgians for war work in Germany. That October, facing massive shortfalls in the amount of labor needed, forced deportations to

⁶² Zuckerman, pp. 22-3; Cook, p. 102; Zuckerman 29-36.

Germany began and by the end of the war the Germans had deported 120,000 Belgian workers. The leading Catholic cardinal inside Belgium and even the German Reichstag protested and the deportations ended in early 1917 with most Belgians repatriated by the summer of that year. The Germans also imposed massive financial demands on the Belgians and looted Belgian industries and stole raw materials without compensation. Finally, a lot of German soldiers and officers had sticky fingers. By 1918 half of Belgium's cattle had died and Belgium, which had been "the world's sixth-ranked industrial power [had been] plundered so thoroughly that it never regained its former place."⁶³

Another thing the Germans did during their occupation was to try to play off the Flemings against the Walloons. After Belgium's four universities had refused to reopen for the Fall 1914 term, citing the potential lack of academic freedom and the impropriety of teaching men who could be only draft-dodgers from the Belgian Army, the Germans granted a long-held Flemish desire—a Flemish university. The Germans reopened the University of Ghent on December 31, 1915. Most of the educators there refused to teach under the Germans and two leading professors were deported to Germany for that refusal. The Germans failed to find enough professors in either Belgium or Holland and ended up using mostly German professors (with a few Dutchmen). Most students refused to study there despite generous German scholarships and beer permits. After the war, teaching in Dutch at the university was banned, wartime degrees were revoked, and wartime students were expelled as having been collaborators. Teaching in Dutch resumed in 1923 and in 1930 Ghent University became fully Dutch-speaking. The Germans also set up a collaborationist "Council of Flanders" in February 1917. The Council demanded the

⁶³ Cook, p. 102, 106-7; Zuckerman, p. 1.

separation of Flanders and Wallonia. In March 1917, the German governor-general granted its wish and split Belgium into two administrative halves: Flanders and Wallonia. Flemish was the official language in Flanders. On November 11, 1917 the Council repudiated the Belgian government in France and called for Flemish independence, which the Council declared eleven days later. The Council and the other active collaborators with the Germans, called “activists,” did not represent the majority of the Belgian population, or “passivists.” In February 1918 the Court of Appeals in occupied Brussels, by a huge majority, demanded the trial for treason for two leading Council members, after which demand the Germans closed down the court and deported three of its presidents.⁶⁴

Shortly after the armistice that ended the fighting in World War One, King Albert, who had become a national hero or even demigod for his “sage conduct” during the war, as well as an international symbol of Belgian loyalty and bravery, summoned leading economists and politicians to the town of Loppem, near Bruges, to establish a new way of doing governmental business. Fearing a revolution on the model of the 1917 Russian Revolution, Albert proposed “enlightened conservatism” to save the monarchy, national unity, and Belgian democracy. Among other things, Albert proposed to continue the war-time “Sacred Union” governments (coalitions in which all three parties, including the socialists, were represented), the eight-hour day, the right to strike, and a graduated income tax. On November 28, in response to the king’s earlier call, the Catholic prime minister proposed introducing one-man one-vote for elections. In 1921 the Belgian constitution was amended to allow equal suffrage for all males over twenty-one with partial suffrage for women (unmarried war widows, widows who lost a son in the war,

⁶⁴ Cook, pp. 102-4.

and women who were imprisoned by the Germans). This strengthened the Flemish movement because now the majority Flemings had a voice consonant with their numbers. It also resulted in the necessity of (frequently unstable) coalition governments because no one party got enough votes to dominate. The Catholics still dominated Flanders while the Socialists still dominated industrial Wallonia and Brussels. There were eighteen different governments between 1918 and 1940, sixteen of which included two or three parties.⁶⁵

After the war, Belgium felt that it was due a lot of reparations from the Germans who had devastated the country and also from the Dutch who had sat idly by while the Germans raped the nation. However, outsiders were quickly forgetting their wartime admiration for “gallant little Belgium.” France was considered the real victim of the war with Belgium merely a “pretender.” Belgium received two seats at the Versailles conference while Brazil of all places got three. The Belgians eventually got their third seat but, in so doing, alienating the forceful French premier Clemenceau, who presided over the conference. The Belgians hoped to be “first in line for reparations” but this was opposed by British Prime Minister Lloyd George. The Belgians also wanted the Germans to assume Belgian war debts and redeem their occupation Marks with gold, again resisted by Lloyd George. Belgium got no satisfaction for its call for Germans to be tried for war crimes committed during the occupation. The Allies did offer Belgium \$500 million to be drawn from German reparations but this amounted only to about half of the funds needed to rebuild the country. The Belgians counted on world goodwill and memory of Belgian suffering to ensure that, as minister of railroads Jules Renkin put it “it is impossible that we will be abandoned.” Yet Belgium, which had been invaded without cause, was forced

⁶⁵ Crahay, p. 9; Witte *et al.*, pp. 105-9. Albert did not bother inviting conservative Catholics because he knew they would oppose his idea. Cook, pp. 115-16.

to repay British and American commercial loans and only got their \$500 million in 1925. From Holland, Belgium tried to get the land it had lost in 1839: Dutch Limburg and Flemish Zealand (by the Scheldt estuary). Belgium also demanded all of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg which, according to the Belgians, had been pro-German. All Belgium got was diplomatic problems with the Netherlands although Luxembourg signed an economic union with Belgium in 1921. "The Belgians, who had not allowed for the possibility that their demands might not be met in full, were deeply offended." Belgium did pick up three German-speaking cantons in the east from Germany as well as some African colonies. Belgian troops also took part in the occupation of the German Rhineland, which they would leave in 1929.⁶⁶

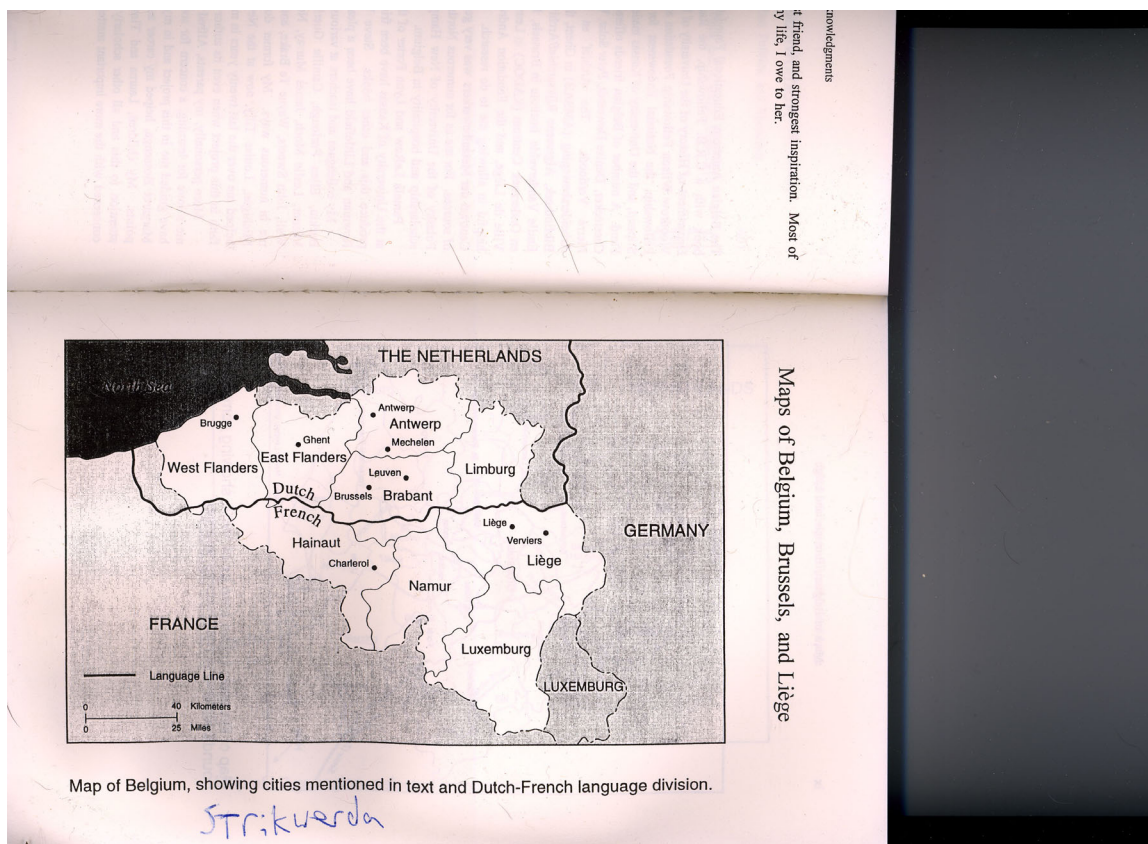
At this time, feeling that neutrality had not had the desired result, Belgium decided to tie itself closely to France and Britain. The latter were willing to guarantee Belgian integrity and security, but only at the cost of Belgium returning to neutrality. This was a non-starter from the Belgian point of view and so the Belgians turned to France. In September 1920 a military convention was signed between France and Belgium that provided for consultation in case of a German attack on French or Belgian occupation troops in the Rhineland. The terms were kept secret, which, unfortunately, allowed everybody to read their worst fears into the document. Three years later, the Belgians joined the French in the controversial occupation of the Ruhr to force Germany to meet its Versailles obligations. Belgium was an enthusiastic member of the League of Nations and a signatory to the 1925 Locarno Pact which guaranteed the permanency of the Belgo-German and Franco-German borders and the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact that

⁶⁶ Cook, p. 113; Zuckerman, pp. 219-237 (Jules Renkin quoted on p. 237), 261; Kossmann, p. 575.

outlawed war as a means of settling disputes. Belgium had thus placed its hopes for security on the international framework.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Kossmann, pp. 574-7; Crahay, pp. 44-5.

Chapter 2: The Language Issue in Belgium



Map 2: The language boundary in Belgium. Carl Strikwerda, *A House Divided: Catholics, Socialists, and Flemish Nationalists in Nineteenth-Century Belgium* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997) p. ix. Used by permission.

The language issue in Belgium long predates the formation of the state. The linguistic frontier was formed at the end of the Roman era by the halting of the Frankish invasions along the present day Walloon-Flemish border, leaving the Latinized Walloons on one side and the Frankish Flemings on the other. Eventually, the region now comprised by Belgium and the Netherlands ended up a Spanish possession. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which settled the Thirty Years War and the Dutch revolt against the Spanish, drew the frontier between the independent Netherlands and the Spanish Netherlands according to the front lines at the time and not according to linguistic or religious frontiers. This left the region that would become Belgium divided within itself. When the region passed from the Spanish Habsburgs to their Austrian cousins, French was the “language of prestige” and the bourgeoisie adopted the language. The French Revolutionary armies entered the Austrian Netherlands in 1794 and France officially annexed it the next year. Belgium was ruthlessly Gallicized until it was made part of the Netherlands by the Congress of Vienna. Fifteen years of Hollandization followed until the Belgians successfully revolted in 1830. The leaders of the revolt were Francophone bourgeois and Francophone language and culture had a privileged position in the new state. Dutch was only recognized as an equal language in 1898.⁶⁸

By 1914, there was still no Flemish-speaking university and Belgian Army officers were not required to speak Flemish fluently. By contrast, officers in the Austro-Hungarian common army had to be conversant in any language spoken by more than 20% of the soldiers in their regiment. Belgian historians Els Witte and Harry Van

⁶⁸ Shepard B. Clough, *A History of the Flemish Movement in Belgium: A Study in Nationalism*, cited in Jonathan Epstein, *In Flanders—Flemish: Language and Nationalism in Flanders*, Paper, City University of New York-Graduate School and University Center, 1997, pp. 3-4; *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6; Els Witte, Jan Craeybeckx, Alain Meynen, *Political History of Belgium from 1830 Onwards*, Trans. Raf Casert (Brussels: VUB UP, 2000), P. 98.

Velthoven observe that “We naturally tend towards a single language. Mastering a second language requires efforts which are made only out of necessity. The social cost is understandably borne by the speakers of the low-status language” who are forced to become bilingual in order to advance socially and economically. Belgium between the wars was, and still is, divided into two main linguistic/cultural groups, the Flemish and the Walloons. French, spoken by the Walloons, was the dominant language and the Walloons did not discourage Flemings from learning French. “According to the supporters of the dominant language group, the process should certainly not be inhibited. Every individual should have the right and the opportunity to work his way up and become integrated in the language group with the greatest prestige, which functions best at a social level.” However, the majority of the Flemish did not see things that way and anybody making any kind of policy in Belgium in the 1930s had to contend with the “Flemish Question.” A professor in the university town of Louvain declared “The future of Belgium can not be assured if one does not take as [the] point of departure of all the manifestations of public life the duality of our population. The Flemish problem. . . . can no longer be eluded; the logical consequences of this duality can no longer be avoided.”

A Flemish deputy declared (in Flemish):

The thesis of [Flemish politician] M. Van Cauwelaert, namely that if ever he had to choose between Belgium and Flanders, he would choose Flanders, is that of the overwhelming majority of conscious Flemings. . . . Numerous would be those who, without doubt, would convert, if Belgium wanted to furnish proof that it understands the legitimate Flemish claims and that it does not want to make of the state the fatherland.

He went on to declare that “Belgium must not want to pose as a fatherland. Flanders is the fatherland of the Flemings and Wallonia that of the Walloons. Belgium is a state, that is to say, the secondary thing. When the state wants to usurp the fatherland, it must fatally

provoke reactions.” The “Flemish question” would affect the Belgian Army because, as Els Witte and Harry Van Velthoven declare,

it is obvious that the political elite will try to stimulate [bilingualism of the low-status language speakers] by their policies. . . . The strategies which are adopted are easy to list. The requirement to master a high status language is focused in the first place on the army and the military command. In this institution, a single command level is not only necessary, but, in addition, the army plays a central role in the process of nation building.⁶⁹

The “Flemish” and/or “Walloon” problem (depending on one’s point of view), long antedates the foundation of the Belgian state. The linguistic frontier follows the stop-line of the Frankish hordes and runs roughly from Maastricht in Holland to Dunkirk in France. During the Middle Ages, the Flemish towns, such as Bruges, Ieper, and Ghent were very prosperous and were able to protect their independence from the French at the 1302 Battle of the Spurs near Courtrai, in which the French knights lost so much loot that a pile of their spurs gave the battle its name.⁷⁰

However, at the end of the fourteenth century, Flanders went to the Francophone Burgundians. This resulted in French replacing Flemish as the language of administration and of the judiciary. After Belgium passed to Austria as the Austrian Netherlands French, the language of prestige and culture despite the Flemish cultural heritage of some of the great painters of all times, including the Bruegels and Peter Paul Rubens, was imposed on the Flemish by the Francophone Flemish bourgeoisie, who taught their own children in French. Naturally the French annexation of Belgium in 1795 did not help the situation.

⁶⁹ Els Witte and Harry Van Velthoven, *Language and Politics: The Situation in Belgium in an Historical Perspective*, Balans #12 (Brussels: VUB University Press, 1999), p. 21; M. Van Goethem, quoted in “Chambre des Représentants, Session de 1936-1937, no. 255” in the Archives of the *Musée Royale de l’Armée et d’Histoire Militaire-Centre de Documentation Historique*—Belgian Archives from Moscow [Henceforth: “MRA-BAFM”] 24(185-2-2), II p. 2; M. D’Haese quoted in “CHAMBRE DES REPRÉSENTANTS-COMPTÉ RENDU ANALYTIQUE Séance du Mardi 25 mai 1937, p. 598 in MRA-BAFR 24(185-2-2), VI; Witte and Van Velthoven, p. 22.

⁷⁰ *The New Columbia Encyclopedia*, sv. Battle of the Spurs.

Nor did the period of Dutch rule help, because even the Flemings considered the Dutch to be foreign interlopers.⁷¹

With the Belgian revolution of 1830, French reassumed its dominant position. The Belgian revolutionaries were Francophones who were inspired by the French example and who hated Dutch as the language of occupation and of the officers thereof. “Dutch had acquired anti-revolutionary and Protestant connotations. Therefore a good patriot had to accept French as the all-embracing language of culture. . . . On the basis of this argument, imposing a knowledge of Flemish on the Walloons, even in Flanders, was a form of unacceptable discrimination.” Although their desire was to create a distinctively Belgian culture to unify the new nation, their choice of French as the vehicle of this culture “undermine[d] the very national unity which they desired to construct” as they rejected the Flemish call to synthesize Germanic and Romance traditions. The new constitution provided that “[t]he use of languages in Belgium is optional. This matter may be regulated only by law and only for acts of public authority and judicial proceedings.” Although this seems to guarantee linguistic equality, most public officials and judges came from the Francophone sectors of society and they chose to use French even in Flanders. There was so little public education in Flemish that 49% of conscripts from East Flanders were illiterate in 1848 compared to only 11% from Francophone Luxembourg! Only French-speakers had access to secondary and higher education while there were no completely Flemish-speaking universities. The provincial governments and even some Flemish municipal councils operated in the Gallic tongue while Flemings who went to court were dealt with in a language with which they were not familiar. Flemish

⁷¹ Jonathan A. Epstein, “In Flanders—Flemish: Language and Nationalism in Flanders” (Paper for Professor Struve, December 22, 1997), p. 4; Dr. R.E.M. Irving, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 4; Shepard B. Clough, cited in *ibid.*; *ibid.*, p. 6; Irving, cited in *ibid.*, p. 7.

was considered by the Francophones to be “not a language but a collection of dialects” suitable only for servants and animals (at the time there were also at least four different dialects of French spoken in Wallonia). A Flemish partisan, Philip Blommaert, pointed out that Flemish Dutch had a long history, with a Flemish hagiography of Saint Servatius dating to before 1200c.e. (By way of comparison, Chaucer’s *Canturbury Tales* came out only in 1387). All this was despite the fact that a majority of Belgians spoke Flemish; according to the 1846 census 2,471,000 Belgians claimed Flemish as their primary language compared to 1,827,000 who claimed French.⁷²

Improbably, Flemish began to get its literary expression in these years. Jan Frans Willems (1793-1846), the “Brothers Grimm of Flanders” pioneered Flemish Romanticism and inspired love of Flemish speech, culture, and history. The *Willemsfonds*, a society dedicated to promoting the language and culture of the Netherlands and to supporting the Flemish people, was founded in his honor in 1851. Ghent housed a nationalist society called “*De Taal is Gansch het Volk*” or “The Language is the Whole People.” Hendrik Conscience came out with his *Lion of Flanders* in 1839. His story, and others, glorified medieval Flanders and contrasted that glory to the bleak situation in current-day Flanders. In the 1840s, a Flemish “party” coalesced around Guido Gezelle, a priest, poet, and high school teacher. This party wanted to bring Flemish into cultural equality with French and bring it into the schools and into the government by stressing the study of Flemish literature and art. Gezelle and other priests identified Flanders with Catholicism and called for Catholicism to return to its roots among the Flemings. Gezelle wanted the Flemish to use “Old Flemish” instead of the

⁷²Witte and Van Velthoven, p. 65; Cook, p. 80; *ibid.*, p 171, ff. 12; Clough, quoted in Epstein, p. 6; Cook, pp. 80-1; Carl Strikwerda, quoted in *ibid*; *ibid.*, p. 171, ff. 12; *ibid.*, pp. 81.

Dutch that the Belgian government was propagating (because the Belgian state did not want to see the emergence of “a distinct standard Flemish variant”). Gezelle eventually fell afoul of the *Fransquillons* (French-speaking Flemings) and was forced to give up his teaching although he began again to write his poetry six years before his death in 1899.⁷³

The Flemish published their first grievances in 1840 when they demanded that all government business involving Flanders be transacted in Flemish. There was some success as the petition gained the support of some Catholics, including clergymen, and the Antwerp and East Flanders provincial governments allowed Dutch alongside French in their proceedings. Els Witte and her co-authors observe that “[t]he slow but steadfast moves towards democratization only reinforced flamingantism [Flemish nationalism].” In 1848 the pro-Flemish “progressive” middle classes benefited from an expansion of voting rights giving them more power. Catholics and liberals were united because they both wanted to use Dutch in all aspects of daily and cultural life. These classes found that they were losing out on social and economic opportunities because they did not speak French. Walloon civil servants were even brought in to take jobs in Flanders. In 1856, Flemish activists called Wallonia the “spoiled child of the government” and compared the “*Fransquillons*” to plantation slaves. The parliament, under Catholic prime minister Pierre de Decker, who had “Flemish sympathies,” formed a commission to look into the Flemish complaints and, in 1859, recommended that trade schools offer Flemish and that Flemish be taught *as a foreign language* in preparatory schools and in the University of Ghent “in order that doctors, lawyers, and educators might be able to serve the people of Flanders.” It also condemned the French language’s monopoly over the government, army, and police, claiming that this violated the constitution. The commission

⁷³ Epstein, p. 13; Witte and Van Velthoven, p. 71; Kossmann, pp. 120-1; Cook, pp. 81-83.

recommended that Flanders become bi-lingual with both languages being official and with Flemings given the choice of which language to use. It also backed Flemish as a language and not just a dialect. This report became the manifesto of the Flemish movement. In the wake of the report, Dutch-speakers won the right to use Flemish with state officials wherever Flemings were a majority, the rights for Flemish-speakers to be accommodated in the courts, and the inauguration of bilingual secondary education for Dutch-speakers. Els Witte and her co-authors note that

[e]arly on, the Flemish movement was remarkably moderate in nature. It respected the Belgian institutions and took care not to criticize the new state. It relied on petitions, leaflets, and polite requests for the government to intervene. Their demands were far from extreme and when the Francophone ruling classes retorted with outright rejections, it fanned the fires of flamingantism. It was clear that the language issue had the potential to become a serious political conflict in its own right.⁷⁴

The pro-Flemish government of Pierre de Decker fell in October 1857 and he was replaced by Charles Rogier as prime minister and a Liberal government. Rogier “had little time for and even less interest in the Flemish problem.” He junked the parliamentary report and replaced it with one urging the maintenance of a “monolingual francophone nation.” Flemish attempts to get a language law on notary acts failed and an amendment to allow prospective university students to take their entrance examinations in Flemish was rejected. Added to these was the continuing phenomenon of carpetbagging Walloons coming in to fill government positions in Flanders. “The government’s accommodating attitude towards the annexationist French empire of Napoleon III only reinforced the flamingants’ anti-establishment feelings. It pushed them further into the opposition camp, right alongside the progressives.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Epstein, p. 7; Witte *et al.*, pp. 45, 69, 70; Cook, p. 81; Epstein, *Ibid.*; Cook, p. 83; Witte, *et al.*, p. 45.

⁷⁵ Kossmann, p. 702; Witte, *et al.*, p. 70.

The heart of the Flemish movement was Antwerp, where the middle classes had remained Dutch-speaking and supported the flamingant demands. However, the growing Catholic-Liberal rift split the flamingant movement, with both parties developing pro-Flemish wings (not always to the delight of the francophone party leaders). The Liberals blamed the poor education of the Flemish on the Church and supported secular education while the Catholics, among whom were many Ultramontanists, claimed “[t]he local language and religion were two inseparable issues that constituted the essence of the Flemish people. The *Dauidsfonds*, the Catholic equivalent of the *Willemsfonds*, was founded in 1875. The Liberal flamingants had greater success than their Catholic counterparts because both liberalism and flamingantism thrived in the cities. The Flemish movement did score some successes as more of its supporters entered the parliament and the government began to concern itself with the Flemish vote. In 1873 Dutch was allowed in criminal law and from 1878 Dutch was used in Flemish administration. Five years after that, a law was passed requiring some high school classes be taught in Flemish in Flanders. However,

[t]hose were tactical concessions more than anything else and it certainly did not stop the gallicization of Flanders. Northern Belgium was far from being an officially bilingual region, since the laws were rarely put into practice. The Flemish movement proceeded at a snail’s pace and it would take until the late 1880s and early 1890s before real change became evident.⁷⁶

Among the main engines driving change was the “second industrial revolution,” which pushed north from Wallonia by 1880. Although the workers were Flemish (considered more docile than the organized Walloons), the money came from Wallonia and Brussels and did nothing for Flemish control over their resources. However, many

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 70-1.

medium and small businesses were started by Flemings who became “a new class of Flemish economic leaders. . . . They rejected the francophone industrial bourgeoisie and created a Flemish alternative based on the Catholic model of class reconciliation. And since they wanted the Belgian state to shift economic policy more towards Flanders, they also opened new vistas for the Flemish movement.”⁷⁷

Along with the economic change came socio-political change. Universal male suffrage (although with plural votes) was established in 1893 and increased Flemish political power because the Flemish vote now had to be wooed and the Flemish wings of the parties gained in importance. “The Flemish middle class was increasingly conscious of its language and culture and it realized that the promotion of Dutch in public institutions would open up the labor market.” In addition, there was a growing realization that all sectors of Flemish society, including the government, should speak the same language. Membership in pro-Flemish groups increased, as did the circulation of Dutch newspapers while more Flemings were reading Flemish literature and students became more bellicose. However, there was no one overarching Flemish organization; flamingants were spread through all political parties and increasingly acted through pressure groups. Their goal remained limited: bilingualism in Flanders. Almost nobody wanted to split up the country. The flamingants scored some successes, getting Dutch language courses into the state universities and approval for the use of Dutch in the appeals courts in Brussels and Liège, as well as in the Belgian army criminal justice system.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Witte *et al.*, pp. 96-7

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 96-97.

These victories did not please the flamingants much because they were vaguely worded and indifferently implemented. Disappointment over these flaws combined with “social economic progress” in Flanders to push the Flemish movement in a new direction. About 1895, two university professors, Julius McLeod and August Vermeyleen, and the economist Lodewijk De Raet, developed “cultural flamingantism” They argued that language discrimination was only one reason for Flemish “backwardness.” The Flemings had to change themselves, had to develop a Flemish cultural elite and a powerful Flemish industrial middle class that could wrest control from the Francophones and make Flanders the dominant part of Belgium. This required better education. The “cultural flamingants” demanded that vocational and university education and, especially, the Ghent State University be made exclusively Dutch-speaking. Before this, flamingants had not dared to demand that Dutch should be the language of university instruction. “Again and again even the most convinced flamingants had hesitated to claim that the Dutch language could be used for scientific purposes. Curiously enough they knew nothing about the situation in the Netherlands. . . [where] the most intricate scientific subjects were lectured on and written about in Dutch as a matter of course.” Indeed, between 1901 and 1914 there were *five* Dutch Nobel Prize winners in the natural sciences *and no francophone Belgians*. There was a lot of resistance to these demands, especially on the part of the francophone higher clergy and higher bourgeoisie. This resistance delayed for three years the proposed bill to make Dutch an official language in Belgium, which was finally passed in 1898.⁷⁹

Parliamentary francophone scorn for Flemish and the Flemings was obvious during the debates and changed the flamingant movement into a genuinely popular

⁷⁹Ibid., pp. 97-8; Kossmann, pp. 465-6; Witte *et al.*, p. 98.

movement. “Farmers, shopkeepers, workmen, parliamentarians, local authorities, professors, and many others protested each in his own way; in innumerable tumultuous meetings this indignation was given voice. The number of those who took part in these manifestations ran into tens of thousands.” The 1898 passage of the language law in its original form was the first major victory of a popularly mobilized Flemish movement. This movement “remained free from hatred and subordinated itself not only to the fact of the Belgian unitary state but also to Belgian national feeling. Even during this democratic phase it did not correspond to such virulent emancipation movements as those of the Czechs or the Irish.” However, tensions were far from non-existent. The Catholic flamingants and their Christian-Democratic allies won a hard-fought victory in the early years of the new century by getting the parliament to extend to private schools laws allowing some high school courses in Dutch in public schools (or the private schools could choose a flat eight hours of Flemish a week). In 1906, Desirè Cardinal Mercier, one of the leading francophone clergymen of the country, and who would emerge as a hero during World War One for his moral leadership, opined that Dutch was unsuitable as a vehicle for higher education. The Flemish students at the University of Louvain, who had a powerful General Catholic Flemish Student Union, protested three years later when Cardinal Mercier was a guest at their annual opening ceremony by having the student band play the Flemish anthem *De Vlaamse Leeuw* (The Lion of Flanders) and shouting out their demands for Flemish at the university. Others argued that making a university Flemish would result in the loss of many students. In 1908 a commission was formed to demand Dutch at the Ghent State University. In the face of mass demonstrations the francophones created their own union to defend the use of French. The same year,

Brabant allowed the use of Dutch in its high provincial court. In 1909 the first form of general conscription was introduced into the Belgian Army. Before that, men conscripted could hire substitutes. This meant the burden of military service fell disproportionately on the poorest sectors of society. “Nowhere was contempt for ‘Flemish’ greater and were ‘Flemish’ speakers treated more as inferiors.” After 1909 all sectors of society were exposed to the “language injustices” in the army. In 1911, bowing to the inevitable, a bill was tabled in parliament but it did not make it through before the Germans rudely interrupted the discussion. In 1914, a law on mandatory education provided that primary education must be in the mother tongue. This law did not make it into Brussels “since people were convinced one had to know French in the capital. . . . The 1914 law did contain a ground for bilingualism and the French-speakers resolutely rejected this.” Walloons feared the loss of their civil service jobs in Brussels or Flanders if the locals could use their own language. “It was also an attack on the privileges and supremacy of the French language. Mandatory bilingualism in the public sector could turn into a monopoly position for the Flemings.” Their fears were not groundless. A Walloon movement emerged as francophone liberal intellectuals demanded a federalist system to defend against a Flemish political predominance that was already putting Catholic conservatives in Parliament over left-wing Walloons. The movement allied with the socialists to oppose bilingualism and the requirement that civil servants in Flanders speak Flemish. “Even ahead of the Great War, the seeds of Belgium’s linguistic problems had been sown—a combative Flemish movement, the inception of a Walloon federalist movement and the bilingual quandary in Brussels.”⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Witte and Van Velthoven, pp. 79, 98; Cook, p. 82; Witte *et al.*, pp. 98-9.

So, in 1914, there was no exclusively Flemish-speaking university in majority Flemish Belgium and Belgian Army officers, who were in the overwhelming majority Francophone, were in practice, required to have only a rudimentary knowledge of Flemish. In 1918 the Flemish Catholic minister Van de Vyvere complained that “[t]o be an officer, it suffices to know Flemish imperfectly. It is necessary to show [ourselves] more rigorous.”⁸¹

Due to the accident of geography that put French-speaking Wallonia closer than Flanders to Germany, the German invasion of August 1914 quickly overran all of Wallonia, leaving only a small slice of Flanders under Belgian control. The result of this was to preclude the recruitment of fresh Walloon soldiers, leading to a situation in which many Flemish soldiers were commanded by Francophone officers lacking any real knowledge of their language. Calls to rectify this were considered violations of military discipline. This led to considerable resentment while at the same time the German occupiers were using the Flemish question to divide the Belgians and make them easier to rule. Although most Flemings remained Belgian patriots, a minority, called “Activists,” collaborated with the Germans. The Activist movement spread to the army in 1916 “in reaction to the linguistic discrimination on the Ijzer [Yser front]” where it was called the “Frontist” movement. Harry Van Velthoven argues that “[t]his confrontation seemed almost inevitable. On the one hand, there was a Francophone army command level. . . which saw an uneducated Flemish soldier as being inferior, and a Flemish-oriented intellectual as threat to the state. . . . On the other hand, there was the budding presence

⁸¹ J. Wullus-Rudiger, *En Marge de la Politique Belge 1914-1956* (Brussels: Berger-Levrault, 1957), p. 370; Istvan Deak, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848-1918* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990), p. 99.

of Flemish oriented intellectuals from the middle classes.” The Frontists demanded an autonomous unilingual Flanders. In a mid-March 1918 pamphlet called *The Catechism of the Flemish Movement*, chapter VII reads: “The activists can be bad; their intentions can be bad, but their principle is good. The salvation of Flanders can no longer be expected from the Flemish people itself, which is sleeping, but from the Belgian government. The activists are thus decided to desire for those who no longer have the will. . . and to impose their will.” They were not necessarily Germanophiles. The same pamphlet later states in a chapter entitled, “*On German aid*. This aid is odious. It is only acceptable in a single case, which is precisely ours: that ‘where only German aid can give us, and will give us, that which we need for our life.’” One hundred and thirty-six Frontists defected during 1918 and provided important information to the Germans. Others, in the face of the German offensives of 1918, refused to fight unless their demands were met. They hoped to drive Belgium out of the war and into a separate peace with Germany should the latter engage to restore Belgian independence and territorial integrity. A message from a Frontist to the collaborationist Council of Flanders founded in 1917 by the Germans as a nascent (but not powerful) Flemish government, urged the latter “to make known to the Germans that the activist force will be, for the future, the Flemish part of the Belgian Army, (ask them) to put, as a consequence, everything in order to encircle or take prisoner the Belgian Army—or at least the greatest part possible.”

In February 1918, Belgian king Albert I wrote:

The sovereign worries about a malaise, which, since the beginning of winter, has appeared in certain regiments in the form of blunt and sudden demonstrations by Flemish soldiers in favor of [their] linguistic demands. The men circulate in a group in the cantonments, proclaiming that they want to be commanded in their language. Tracts and inscriptions are spread for the same ends. . . . The inquests and arrests prove that the

militants are nearly always irreproachable fighters under fire, whom the promise of the creation, after the war of Flemish regiments and of a Flemish university would calm.⁸²

The same month, recognizing the dangers posed by the declaration of Flemish independence by the Council of Flanders and the necessity of keeping the Flemish soldiers in the line, the king presided over a meeting of the Council of Ministers. Two suggestions were adopted without debate: allowing Flemish Circles of Intellectual Conference to be held in the army and giving certain journals more privileges. The debate over the third suggestion foreshadowed the arguments used on both sides of the Flemish question throughout the Interwar period. The King himself called for the creation of Flemish regiments and backed the suggestion of the Flemish Catholic Minister Helleputte that there should be military training in Flemish. Albert observed that, “If a single language must be admitted for command, Flemish would impose itself as being the language of the majority of the soldiers.” M. Carton de Wiart, a Brussels Walloon Catholic minister and later Prime Minister in a “Sacred Union” government, responded that the creation of Flemish regiments “would provoke a divorce between Flemings and Walloons.” He also pointed to practical difficulties such as the fact that the proportion of Flemish to Walloon officers did not match that of Flemish to Walloon soldiers. Lt. General de Ceuninck, the Minister of National Defense, gave the percentage of Flemish-speaking infantrymen as 80%. General de Ceuninck also pointed out that relations between Flemish and Walloon comrades were good. He warned that there would not be enough Flemish officers to staff Flemish regiments and that “from the point of view of

⁸² Els Witte *et al.*, pp. 102-3; Witte and Van Velthoven, pp. 118-9 (chapter written by Van Velthoven); quoted in Wullus-Rudiger, pp. 142-3; Albert Crahay, *L'Armée belge entre les deux guerres* (Brussels?: Louis Musin, 1978), pp. 27-8; General van Overstraeten, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 28; Witte *et al.*, p. 103; Crahay, 29; Witte, p. 103; J. Wullus-Rudiger, *En Marge de la Politique Belge 1914-1956* (Brussels: Berger-Levrault, 1957), pp. 144, 116; Quoted in Crahay, p. 28.

discipline, the proposed reform could cause a disaster.” It was necessary to keep the unity of command and he was concerned that Flemish soldiers might refuse to obey orders given in French. Besides, some technical terms borrowed from the French army could not be translated into Dutch. M. Vandervelde, the president of the Belgian Socialist party pointed out that “the soldiers that I have seen have never spoken to me of linguistic grievances.” Prime Minister de Broqueville, a Walloon Catholic, called for a declaration that must “bring something to the Flemings.” He noted that “[t]he Flemish grievances aim at the organic structure of the Belgian state. In 1830, centralization was admitted as the basis of unity. This centralization was produced in an essentially French way. Today it is important to give a new basis to the relations between the citizens and the state.” However, a new law governing languages in the army could not be introduced during the war although Flemish and Walloon units should be formed to show “our good will.” In any case, the Flemish wanted to keep national unity. The King returned to practical issues, “notably in what concerns the recruitment of the officer corps. [However,] regional recruitment creates a very great emulation between the soldiers of such an army, the war has proved it.” In the end, they agreed to write a declaration and, in their departments, re-study the problem.⁸³

After the war, Flemish Activists were penalized and Passivists, those who did not collaborate with the Germans, returned to their agitation. Belgium jailed or interned hundreds of Activists and suspected Activists. Many were tried while an approximately equal number simply languished in jail without trial. Civil servants and the like perceived as having been too cooperative with the Germans were fired. Thirty-nine Activists were

⁸³ Wullus-Rudiger, pp. 367-75.

sentenced to death although none of the sentences were carried out. E.H. Kossmann observes that

the fact that only a few Walloons were prosecuted, the arbitrariness of many arrests, the rigour of some measures—university entrance was forever forbidden to young people. . . who had studied at the Flemish university of 1917—all this, and the whole atmosphere in which the persecution took place, suggested that this was not to be regarded as administering justice but as wreaking vengeance upon the Dutch-speaking majority of the population in general.⁸⁴

Perhaps the most famous case was that of Doctor August Borms. He was arrested as an Activist and sentenced to death, although this sentence was commuted. After spending ten years in jail, an Antwerp member of parliament died, requiring a by-election to replace him. The Flemish Front Party put Borms up as a candidate although as a felon Borms could not serve in the parliament. Borms won the election with 83,000 votes against 44,000 for the Liberal candidate and 53,000 abstentions. This incident, expressing Flemish frustration against the slow pace of Flemish equalization and the desire to amnesty Flemish Activists, would lead the Francophones to reassess their situation.⁸⁵

The Passivists acted mainly through the Flemish wing of the Catholic party. At the same time, Belgian electoral reform providing for one man one vote increased the power of the Flemish population and led to the creation of a specifically Flemish nationalist party, the “Flemish Front Party,” composed of Flemish veterans and Activists, to press for Flemish demands. “The Vlaamsche Front defined itself as nationalist, left-wing, and antimilitarist. It is possible to justify this definition, but not easy. The intellectual confusion in which the party found itself was the more confounded when former activists who had not themselves fought in the war began to join in.” The Frontists

⁸⁴ Kossmann, p. 634.

⁸⁵ H.J. Elias cited in *ibid.*; *ibid.*, pp. 646-7.

denied the existence of a Belgian “nation.” Some even denied the existence of a *Flemish* nation, arguing instead that the Flemings were part of a larger Dutch-speaking nation. “As for being left-wing, there were the usual grandiloquent claims to democratic progressiveness, but underneath there seems to have been just a feeling of disgust for the French-speaking upper classes and an honest desire for a better society rather than anything that could be called a political programme.” Their anti-militarism represented more a revulsion against the conditions in the trenches during the war than an ideological aversion to violence itself.⁸⁶

Although all Flamings agreed that Flanders must be unilingually Dutch-speaking, the post-war Flemish movement split over how far the individual members wanted to go. The so-called “minimalists” felt it best to work through the existing channels, trusting in the new voting power of the Flemings to make the traditional parties push for Flemish equality. These Flemings wanted to keep the Belgian state structure and parliamentary government. The “maximalists,” on the other hand, felt the traditional means had failed and something more drastic had to be tried. They wanted Flemish autonomy in a form that threatened the survival of the Belgian state system or even the state itself. The maximalists got their start in the Front Party.⁸⁷

The Francophone bourgeoisie and intellectuals, opponents of federalism, saw the recent war as the triumph of “Latin civilization over the Germanic hordes.” They drew from the experiences of the German creation of a collaborationist Flemish university in Ghent and of the Activist treason the lesson that the answer to Belgium’s problems was

⁸⁶ Witte *et al.* pp. 125-6; Kossmann, pp. 638-9; Crahay, p. 29; Kossmann, *ibid.*

⁸⁷ Kossmann, pp. 636-8.

even more emphasis on Francophone culture. There was certainly no rush to grant the Flemings their university.¹⁸

In the army, nothing had changed. Flemish and Walloon soldiers were mixed in the units, as were non-commissioned officers, although most of the latter spoke at least a little French. On the other hand, even officers who had learned some Flemish during the war spoke only French amongst themselves. Indeed, some spoke so little Flemish that they needed NCOs to translate for them. This even extended to the military doctors. Flemish senior officers were few and only French was spoken in the bureaucracy, the headquarters, and the mess. Entry examinations for the *École militaire* (the Belgian West Point) were exclusively in French and while there was an examination in Flemish proficiency, it was literary Flemish of no practical use for officers. Courses, including those teaching Dutch, were given in French. Aspiring second lieutenants did have to pass an exam in Dutch but at worst a failure would delay their careers for six months. Aspiring majors had to prove their “effective knowledge” of Flemish but the test was not hard, because “it was feared it would eliminate too many good officers.” Belgian officers seeking higher education at the *École de Guerre* would take their entrance examinations and learn their lessons in French until 1940 while only two years earlier had the first course in Dutch been introduced.¹⁹

Flemings demanded real equality in the army between the two national languages. They also wanted regional recruitment with Flemish soldiers serving in Flemish units which trained and commanded in fluent Flemish, equal chances at promotion for

¹⁸ Witte *et al.*, p. 106.

¹⁹ Crahay, pp. 29-30.

Flemings and Walloons, and the formation of exclusively Flemish or Walloon units up to the regimental level.²⁰

Not surprisingly, many Francophone officers resisted these demands. Some opposed any Flemish demands out of resentment against Frontist behavior during the war; others, Belgian patriots, feared the breakup of their country or felt that the mixing of Flemings and Walloons in the units was the best defense against the fragmentation of the army. Many officers pointed to the practical difficulties of making the army half-Flemish, including translating all regulations into Dutch, creating Dutch words for French technical terms, and getting enough university-trained Flemish officers (especially hypocritical since the creation of a Flemish university was also resisted). Finally, there was simple laziness. Why, they asked themselves, should Francophone officers bother to learn a language that was essentially useless abroad, especially since most recruits spoke not classical Dutch but Flemish dialects? Flemish circles reacted against all this resistance to what they felt were their justified demands by rejecting the army and becoming anti-militarist. In the 1936 military-civilian Mixed Commission, the then chief of staff of the Belgian Army, Lieutenant General Edouard Van den Bergen, weighed in to defend his officers against the charge of being anti-Flemish by noting that every regiment had courses on Flemish, frequently taught by civilians. “The anti-Flemish spirit of which M. Marck spoke does not exist in the army; in the regiments there is only one spirit: the *esprit de corps*, and the Walloons and the Flemings belonging to the same regiment have it to an equal degree.” He went on to observe that it was not the army’s fault if 8/10s of

²⁰ Ibid., p. 31.

the officers were Walloon: “If the army became sympathetic to the Flemings, there would be more numerous Flemish officers. There is a vicious circle.”²¹

E.H. Kossmann divides the interwar progress of the Flemish movement into three phases. “the first a period of hesitation and compromise (1919-28), the second characterized by a series of rapid and thorough reforms, and the third starting about 1935, during which a few gaps in the recent legislation were filled but which was largely distinguished by the state of disarray that followed the fulfillment of the minimalist program. . . .” In 1921, bitter Francophone opposition was overcome when a law was passed making only Dutch the official administrative language in Flanders although many loopholes still existed.²²

In 1923, in the wake of the Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr, Minister of National Defense Albert Devèze, a reserve artillery officer during the war and an enthusiastic Walloon partisan, and the Liberal party had to accept making the University of Ghent Flemish as well as allowing some regional recruitment as the cost of getting military service extended to one year from ten months for most branches. Under the new system, Belgium was divided into six recruiting regions in order to give each army division “a proportional number of Flemings and Walloons. Officers still spoke and commanded in French. However, four years later, on December 15, 1927, in order to forestall the resignation of the Belgian Army chief of staff, Lieutenant-General Galet, who claimed that Belgium would become indefensible if pressures for disarmament succeeded, King Albert I established a military-civilian “mixed commission” to examine the needs of the military. Among its findings, published on April 3, 1928, was a call for a

²¹ Ibid., p. 31; M. le lieutenant general Van den Bergen to the Commission Mixte, 17e séance—Mardi 4 Août 1936 (après-midi), Report of the Mixed Commission, p. 113.

²² Kossmann, p. 645.

new linguistic regime ensuring all recruits were trained entirely in their “maternal language.” This call was answered by the Linguistic Law of November 7, 1928, which provided for single-language units up to company size and for the grouping of these units into single-language battalions or regiments when numbers permitted. The provisions of the 1928 law came into effect with the class of 1930. At the same time, the army regulations were translated into Dutch for the first time. Charles de Broqueville, the Minister of National Defense reported, on May 6 of that year, that

the application of the law has rendered necessary the translation of the *regulations* bearing directly on the instruction of subaltern officers. . . . The regulations translated into Flemish will be distributed shortly; all the officers will receive a collection as well as a copy of the French-Flemish and Flemish-French dictionary having served as the base for the translation of the regulations.”

Minister de Broqueville would very shortly after note a problem that would haunt the Belgian Army up to and including 1940--the lack of Flemish reserve officers. Although the deficit could be made up by using officers declaring themselves bilingual (despite their first choice of language being French), there were inconveniences: “To prepare these [bilingual trainees] to fulfill their mission in the Flemish units to which they are affected, the practical knowledge which will be necessary to them while they are assigned to these units will have to be repeated to them in Flemish.”²³

Despite these efforts, the implementation of the 1928 law left much to be desired.

On September 10, 1936, Major-General Piraux, commanding the Fortified Town of

²³ Centre de Documentation Historique des Forces Armées, *Histoire de l'Armée Belge de 1830 à nos Jours*, vol. II, *de 1920 à nos jours* (Brussels: Editions Centre de Documentation Historique des Forces Armées, 1988) [henceforth “CDHFA”], pp. 26-8; Crahay, p. 32, 106; CDHFA, pp. 36-7; Letter from the Minister of National Defense to all military authorities (up to and including commanders of company, squadron, battery and flight), “Object: Application of the law relative to the usage of languages in the Army in what concerns the instruction of the troop and of the officers,” dated May 6, 1930, reproduced in the 16e séance of the Commission Mixte, Report of the Commission Mixte p. 99; Letter from the Minister of National Defense to all military authorities, “Object: Linguistic régime of unit schools and evening courses,” dated May 9, 1930, reproduced in *ibid.*, p. 103.

Antwerp, complained about the lack of knowledge of French among the officers under his command and announced he would establish courses allowing the Flemish officers to “perfect” their French. The ignorance (or apathy?) went both ways; on the very next day, the commander of the Second Infantry Division complained to the commanders of his subordinate units that the courses in Dutch were under-filled. “The small number of officers desirous of following the courses provided for. . . shows sufficiently that the importance of the profound knowledge of our second national language escapes the majority among them.” The Sixth Regiment of the Infantry of the Line established three courses to teach officers and non-commissioned officers enough Dutch over the winter of 1936-1937 to perform their duties when working with Dutch-speakers. The courses, one for superior officers and two for subaltern officers (a medium course and a lower course), included “—a review of syntax, the critical study of Dutch texts dealing with questions of military order, in order to help perceive the nuances of the language.--The study, for officers, of the judicial guide, for the non-commissioned officers, of the rules of discipline.” The courses would be taught completely in Dutch except for the review of syntax. The student officers were urged to purchase their textbooks, *Beknopte Nederlandsche Spraakkunst voor Waalsche Scholen* [*Brief Dutch Grammar for Walloon Schools*] and *Oefeningen by de beknopte Nederlandsche Spraakkunst vor Waalsche Scholen* [*Exercises with the Brief Dutch Grammar for Walloon Schools*], which were available for 8 Belgian Francs (BEFs) 40 Centimes at the Van Ishoven bookstore in Antwerp. Civilian professors would take in 35 BEFs per lesson if they had doctorates in Germanic philology, 30BEFs if they were just taken from medium or normal education, and 25BEFs if they did not fit into the other two categories.²⁴

²⁴ Letter from the Commander of the Fortified Town of Antwerp to the Headquarters of corps and services of the

The world looked very different by the time the next Mixed Commission was founded by King Leopold III in 1936. Among other things, two new Flemish nationalist parties with definite Nazi or Fascist bents, had been founded. The *Vlaams Nationaal Verbond* (Flemish National League) was founded in October 1933. Led by the Catholic teacher and former Frontist Staf de Clercq, the party attracted pro-Flemish Catholic junior civil servants, small storeowners, employees, and a smattering of farmers and workers hard hit by the economic crisis—the same mix that in Germany supported Hitler. De Clercq and his followers wanted to establish an “‘organic democratic’ corporatist state.” There would be no political parties and the government would rule by decree. De Clercq was fervently anti-Belgian with German sympathies. He dreamed of a “Greater Dietsland” including Flanders and Holland. The party peaked in 1936 (as did Léon Degrelle’s Walloon fascist Rexist party), winning 16 seats in the 202-seat Chamber, exceeding the Frontist results in the 1932 elections. The party then stagnated as De Clercq’s anti-Belgianism turned off potential defectors from the Catholic Party. He did appeal to the Germans and was subsidized by the German Propaganda Ministry. De Clercq himself, unbeknownst to the rest of his party, cooperated with the *Abwehr*. He also went against his chief ideologist in pushing the V.N.V. in an anti-Semitic direction.⁸⁸

The other Flemish fascist party was the *Verdinaso* (*Vereenigde Dietsche Nationaal-Solidaristen*/ United Dietsch National Solidarists), led by Joris van Severen, which appealed to “young intellectuals and farmers.” He was pro-Belgian, used the Belgian flag, and even drew financial support from the Francophone bourgeoisie and

garrison, dated 10 September, 1936, MRA-BAFM 396 (185-14-823), document 63; Letter from the Commander of the 2 D.I. to the Commanders of the 5, 6, 9 [Infantry Regiments], 2 A[rtillery], and Dép/2 DI, dated 11 September 1936, *ibid.*, document 60; Headquarters, 6th Regiment of the Infantry of the Line, Annex to the document concerning reserve officer personnel of 30 November 1936, object “Course of Dutch for officers”, *ibid.*, Document 54; *Le Ministre de la Defense Nationale* “to all military authorities”, dated 20 *Novembre* 1936; *Ibid.*, Document 57.

⁸⁸ Witte, *et al.* pp. 149-50.

aristocracy. He believed in a conservative revolution led by a disciplined elite. As a solidarist, he believed in cross-order solidarity. Like De Clercq, van Severen dreamed of a greater Dietsland but he wanted to include Wallonia and northern France. Unlike De Clercq, van Severen supported Belgium during the period of mobilization. This did not save the latter from arrest by the Belgian authorities in May 1940. He was to be shipped to France along with Communists, German spies, Jews, and anti-Nazi German refugees. After being turned over to French authorities in Abbeville on May 20, he was shot by drunken French soldiers. His movement died with him.²⁵

Outside of Belgium, everything had changed with the German remilitarization of the Rhineland on March 7, 1936. Not only had the Germans brought their army back to Belgium's front door but also the passivity of the Franco-British convinced the Belgians that they could not be relied upon and that it was time to chart an independent course. It was also time to rebuild the army. On March 25, 1936, in order to reexamine the needs of the military in the light of German rearmament and Allied passivity to that rearmament, Leopold ordered the formation of a Mixed Commission. The anti-militarist socialists and the Flemish, who did not want the Belgian army to be built up to fight for French interests, demanded an independent foreign policy as the price for their acceptance of rearmament. A Flemish member of Parliament, M. Marck, declared (in Flemish) that:

The Flemish land in its great majority raises itself against a unilateral military policy which would be chained and parallel to the military policy of France. Flanders does not desire that our military policy move in the furrow of the French military policy. . . . But whatever the [Mixed] Commission can think of it, it must always take into account the fact that public opinion in Flanders, as much the working class as the bourgeoisie and the intellectuals, is hostile to a military policy that bases itself on that of France. And, remark this well, I do not aim here at the understanding

²⁵ Witte, *et al.*, p. 153.

between headquarters, but at a policy of permanent collaboration in military matters with France.

Two-and-a-half years later, Major Paris, the British military attaché to Belgium would observe that

[d]uring 1938, the full effects of the large-scale reorganisation of the Belgian Army, which was initiated in 1936 and 1937, began to make themselves clearly felt. Its progress and the spirit animating all classes of the population prove that the national policy of independence has led to no lessening in all measures for defense. The reverse is rather the case.²⁶

The Mixed Commission debated the language issue at length. An annex, probably prepared by Albert Devèze, again the Minister of National Defense, to answers to earlier questions by M. Marck set out the current state of affairs:

- a) Regional recruitment is practiced in our army in the manner defined in article 6 of the militia law [of 1928]. (As much as possible, it is necessary to assign militiamen to garrisons situated at [most] 50 kilometers from their domicile.)
- b) This regional recruitment is tempered by certain impossibilities of realization provoked by the facts here below:
 1. Each province does not furnish the number of militiamen necessary to the units which are caserned there.
Example: the province of Liège lacks 2,525 militiamen in 1936.
 2. The linguistic régime.
 3. The differential times of service.
 4. The choice of the arm or of the garrison for certain militiamen.
 5. The special needs of certain units.²⁷

A Flemish member of parliament noted that the army was viewed very differently in Flanders and Wallonia. “In the Flemish lands, the army, being given the existing situation, is scarcely sympathetic. It can become so only if Flemings and Walloons there have the same rights, by the introduction of an organic linguistic equality which still does not exist there at the moment.” Indeed, the two Flemish deputies on the commission,

²⁶ Crahay, p.103; Witte *et al.*, p. 154; Crahay, pp. 172, 176; M. Marck to the Commission Mixte, 16e séance, Report of the Commission Mixte p. 90, Belgian Central Library of Defense; 1938 Annual Report, (British) Foreign Office# 371/22871/5540, page 332, MRA-Attaché Militaire Britannique 80/3/XIII .

²⁷ *Annexe no. 2 aux réponses faites à M. Marck*, *ibid*, p. 95.

MM. Marck and Van Hoek, tried, on August 25, 1936, to resign from the commission, citing (among other reasons) “we don’t want even to stress the fact that all these debates are done essentially in French—while there are only two members who usually express themselves in Dutch—and that too little interest is attached to the linguistic problem in the army and to the moral protection of the soldier.”²⁸

The same MP also addressed major problems in the Belgian Army: the lack of Flemish officers and the desire to use the army as a tool for social engineering to solve the Flemish question. M. Van Hoek wanted a strong army and a unified Belgium:

It must not be forgotten that there is no good army without excellent chiefs. These latter must speak the language of their soldiers and be capable of uniting in the same sentiments as their troops. The integral Flamandisation of military education, under a single direction, is alone capable of forming officers capable of commanding the Flemish units and of winning the heart of their soldiers. This Flamandisation will be the first step in the way of appeasement.²⁹

A leading opponent of the Flemish demands, Albert Devèze, grudgingly accepted the idea of allowing studies in Dutch but opposed other proposals as leading to a duplication of military schools, officer career tracks, and even armies—one Flemish and one Walloon—and, eventually, “the end for the country.” Lieutenant-General Van den Bergen, in rejecting the plea for a Flemish section in the *école de guerre*, pleaded for more time, explaining that the lack of Flemish officers and cadets was due to the lack of military preparatory schools in Flanders, which lack was being addressed by the creation of such a school in Antwerp. When there would be enough Flemish officers eligible there

²⁸ M. Van Hoek to the *Commission Mixte*, 17e séance—Mardi 4 août 1936 (après-midi), Report of the Commission Mixte, p. 112. Testimony begins on p. 111; Letter to Prime Minister van Zeeland, reproduced on page 552 of the Proceedings of the Commission Mixte, MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), s/f “documents relatif à l’elaboration des effes.r”. Their request was denied.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

would be a Flemish section. As to the complaint that only French was used between officers, “the current officer corps is composed of officers accustomed to expressing themselves in French, their maternal language. That is why the conferences of officers in the regiments are done in French.”³⁰

The next afternoon, MM. Marck and Van Hoek presented a resolution for discussion:

The Commission,

noting that the linguistic regime currently existing in the army absolutely does not suit the very great majority of the Flemish population and that this latter complains, among others, of the absence or insufficiency of legal dispositions which must assure an effective linguistic equality in the establishments of military education, in the military, economic, and industrial organisms, in the military administration, and in the technical reports, as well as, and not least, in recruitment, in the determination of military areas and in the distribution of the army;

Judging that the continuation of such a state of spirit is not at all of a nature to reinforce the moral value of our army;

Expresses the wish that, without more delay, a law realize, in our military organization, reforms which, taking into account the technical possibilities, by the action of the law and of the regulations, reforms be realized which, all in respecting the principle of the unity of the army, of its command and of its officer corps, and while taking into account the technical possibilities, definitively establish organic equality from the linguistic point of view, as well as an equal respect for the personality of the Fleming and of the Walloon.³¹

M. Marck, speaking in Flemish, went on to give the Flemish position at greater length: the Flemish wanted to preserve the political unity of Belgium and unilingualism in Flanders, Wallonia, and even in the German-speaking cantons, with the exception of greater Brussels, was a *fait accompli* recognized by linguistic laws. In fact, those laws would *reinforce* the political unity of Belgium by making the Flemings feel like equal

³⁰ M. Devèze to the *Commission Mixte*, Proceedings of the Commission Mixte, p. 112, MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), s/f “documents relatif à l’elaboration des cffes.r.”; M. le lieutenant general Van den Bergen to the *Commission Mixte*, Proceedings of the Commission Mixte, p. 114, MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), s/f “documents relatif à l’elaboration des cffes.r.”.

³¹ M. le president [M. Georges Hubin] to Commission Mixte, 19e séance, Mercredi 5 août 1936, *ibid.*, p. 122.

citizens of the state. The Flemish supported unity of direction in the army as well as a single general staff although the latter should be organized so that it could communicate in Flemish with Flemish units. “We do not demand two armies but rather a linguistic regulation that does not make an abstraction of unification. Moreover, it is appropriate to take technical necessities into account. We thus do not demand anything that could compromise the technical value of the army.” The Flemish also wanted unilingual military districts in which troops stationed there would speak the local language and they wanted military education in Dutch. “Finally, we insist that relations between units [be conducted] in Flemish from top to bottom of the hierarchy. There, in general terms, is our program.” M. Devèze returned to the charge that there would be two officer corps although Flemish delegates reassured him that officers from major on up would be bilingual and there would only be one book of seniority and one advancement. He argued that if officers could not pass from units of one linguistic regime to the other there would in fact be two armies. M. Marck admitted that there would be officers in both regions unfit to lead units in the other language because they would eventually forget that other language if it were not immediately used. Devèze noted that the linguistic situation was improving and that soon there would be enough Flemish officers issuing from unified military schools with Flemish and Walloon sections and remaining in a unified officer corps to permit real equality, especially since majors would still have to demonstrate their “profound knowledge” of both languages and so could pass from units of one linguistic regime to another. During its debate on the matter, The Chamber of Representatives observed that

The single advancement, inseparable from the principle of the homogenous and national army, requires that a vacant place be occupied by the most senior officer in useful order.

It is thus necessary that every officer, and particularly the superior officer, can occupy any job coming to his arm, whatever its linguistic regime. The application of this principle is particularly important in a small army where the number of superior jobs is limited. . . .

This [need for] interchangeability is still more imperious in times of war while the losses are heavier above all in certain arms.

This unavoidable interchangeability is one of the essential reasons that require that the superior officer be bilingual.³²

The resolution proposed by MM Marck and Van Hoek was slightly amended and passed and was taken up by the Belgian Chambre des Représentants (Belgian lower house of parliament) in its session of 1936-7. The goal of the bill debated in the Chambre was “to integrate the army equally, as an educational and constructive element in the organization of the country.” The Army would thus be used as a tool for social engineering, as M. Van Hoek, the Reporter for the Central Section of the Chambre, would declare: “The application of the law [on language use in the army] will soon teach us whether the legislator has succeeded in creating a complete and durable work which, in the domain of demands for equality in the linguistic matter, has been able to give satisfaction to the population and has put an end to a conflict which has for so long paralyzed the energies of the country. We ardently hope so.” The Central Section, which had studied the problem, recommended some actions to take in furtherance of the goal. It called for establishing separate military education for recruits, taught only in the specific language of the students, 55% of whom wanted to study in Flemish, 44.5% in French, and .5% in German; distributing officer-candidates and corporals proportionately to the number of militiamen produced by each region; and promoting or assigning officers only to units in whose language they had effective knowledge, “in other words, this signifies

³² MM. Marck, Devèze, Van Hoek to Ibid; Chambre, Session 1936-1937, no. 255, p. 10.

that only the Flemish officer *can be designated to a Flemish unit [sic]*. . . . thus this latter, issued from his own people, who has familiarized himself from the beginning with the language, mores, and customs of this people, this latter who thus will have followed the Flemish military education. . . .” This scheme of instruction and recruitment would permit the military and the administration to be “[m]ade Flemish from bottom to top. The same considerations are valid for French units.” Eventually, the system of unilingual regiments would be extended to unilingual divisions. This would be “[the] only sane and satisfactory solution so that ‘all’ the relations between officers and the superior military authority can take place in Dutch or in French.” Each section in the Belgian Army headquarters and in the Ministry of National Defense would have an “equilibrium” between Flemish and Walloon officers or staffers. The Third Section (operations) of the headquarters would be divided into Flemish and Walloon subsections as would the headquarters of army corps, divisions, and mixed units. This was to be accomplished by 1944. Mixed garrison units would be eliminated.³³

The recommended changes extended to the *École militaire*, which would be reorganized. M. Van Hoek, a deputy from the Catholic Party and the reporter for the Central Section, called the changes “the essential point of the reform that we will discuss in the *Chambre*.” The *École militaire* would remain one school with a bilingual commander but it would have a Flemish section in which military education and commands were given in Dutch and in which Flemish students were grouped into separate units commanded in Dutch. Subaltern officers would be assigned only to units of the language in which they passed their exams. Evolutions involving the entire school

³³ *Chambre des Représentants, Session de 1936-1937, no 261*, MRA-BAFM 24(185-2-2), V, pp. 6-7; *Chambre des Représentants, Session de 1936-1937, no. 255* in *Ibid.*, 24(185-2-2), II, pp. 3, 18.

would be bilingual and professors would have to demonstrate their profound knowledge of the language of their section. The number of students would be limited by the needs of each language.

This last provision led to much resistance from some Walloon advocates because it implied that Walloons desiring a military career would suffer from a quota system. Even a moderate Walloon delegate, the Liberal Emile Jennissen, who admitted the legitimacy of Flemish complaints and supported the measure (article 10), complained “it is certain, however, that the Walloons have consented to considerable sacrifices. . . . The Walloons will thus be victims of article 10. . . . The Walloons are thrown back. We give in with good grace because we accept that the Flemish take the control levers which are proper to them.” However, another Walloon representative, the Socialist Joseph E. G. Martel, complained:

I did not expect to have to fight M. Jennissen. [As a] young Walloon, I will tell other Walloons why I cannot vote for this project. M. Jennissen has presented himself as resigned [to the adoption of the bill]. He has obtained from the commission all that it was possible to obtain in his opinion.

I will not vote for this project of linguistic revenge, I will not vote for it because it prevents Walloons from making a career in the army and because it is dangerous for the national defense.

The Flemish, we are told, are a majority in Belgium. But they have been for a long time and they owe to themselves the injustices of which they complain.

Today, it is the Walloons who want to avenge themselves. It is forgotten that the liberation of Flanders is the consequence of the universal suffrage won by the Walloons.

Nevertheless, the Chamber passed the bill on February 2, 1937 by a vote of seventy-nine to fifteen with fourteen abstentions.³⁴

³⁴ Chambre des Représentants, *Session de 1937-1938, No 168, “Projet de Loi relatif à l’usage des langues à l’armée”*, *Rapport Complémentaire*, MRA-BAFM 24(185-2-2), III, p. 6; Chambre des Représentants, *Session de 1936-1937, no 255, ibid.*, II, p. 5; M. Jennissen to the *Chambre des Représentants*, *Chambre des Représentants—Compte Rendu*

In its next term, the Belgian Senate (upper house of parliament) took up the issue. The same fears that affected the military also affected some senators. Within the Commission on National Defense, one member opposed the proposed bill because he feared its provisions “would only aggravate the division in the army and in the country” while another two members “fear that officers of Walloon origin would suffer [a] detriment to their career because of the difficulty that they will experience in possessing a profound knowledge of the Flemish tongue.” Nevertheless, the Commission recommended “that this law must be discussed and voted in the Senate without stopping and without modification of the text transmitted by the Chamber.” The bill was passed into law on July 30, 1938.³⁵

It then fell to the Belgian Army to implement the new law. In a letter to the commander of the École Royale Militaire dated October 29, 1939, Minister of National Defense Lieutenant General Denis declared that, based on the needs of the Belgian peacetime army, the infantry and cavalry section of the school should include 36 students in the Flemish division and 34 in the French, with 60 of them in infantry (31 Flemings); 5 in the cavalry (2 Flemings), and 5 for the transport corps (3 Flemings). The artillery and engineering section should have 42 students in the Flemish division and 28 in the French. Of those, 47 (31 Flemings) should be artillerymen and 23 (11 Flemings) should be engineers. One of the greatest difficulties, one which would haunt the Belgian Army, was enticing enough qualified Flemish candidates into the École militaire. Lieutenant General

Analytique, Séance du mardi 25 mai 1937, *Ibid.*, VI, p. 597; M. Martel to *ibid.*, p. 598; Chambre des Représentants, *Séance de 1936-1937*, no 255, p. 1, *ibid.*

³⁵ “O.O. 2”, Ministère de la Défense Nationale, Service du Personnel Militaire, 2e Bureau, No. D. 26/410, MRA-BAFM 396 (185-14-823), documents 12, 13; Sénat de Belgique, *Séance du 14 Juillet 1938*, “*Rapport de la commission de la Défense Nationale chargée d’examiner le Projet de loi relatif à l’usage des langues à l’armée*,” *Documents Parlementaires* (nr. 247), MRA-BAFM 24(185-2-1), XVII, p. 8; *ibid.*; CDHFA, p. 59.

Denis stated to the Belgian Senate that of the seventy students admitted to the Artillery and Engineering section in 1938, only thirteen chose Dutch as their principal language, while only sixteen of the 1939 class of seventy selected it. As for the Infantry and Cavalry section, eighteen of seventy candidates selected Dutch in 1938 and seventeen in 1939. French-speaking candidates were urged to shift to the Flemish section. Only seven answered the call in 1938 and ten in 1939. In other words, the Flemish sections had an additional forty-one unoccupied slots for Flemish speakers in 1938 and thirty-five in 1939. M. Van Hoek had suggested to the minister of national defense back in 1937 that in the short term, the former was prepared (as he suggested to the minister of national defense) to accept that the short-term lack of Flemish officers be remedied by recruiting among Francophone reserve officers desiring to pass onto the active list. These officers would be allowed to take their entry examinations in French but would then be educated in Flemish. There were also provisions for courses for officers and non-commissioned officers that would be offered in the garrisons. A November 23, 1938 booklet from the Service of Military Personnel of the Ministry of National Defense spelled out the details of the courses for and the examinations on the knowledge of the second national language. Courses for candidate second lieutenants involved teaching grammar, developing vocabulary, especially military vocabulary, and the study of the “Judicial Guide.” They learned through “readings, dictations, translations, unseen translations, and compositions on military subjects; conversations on the military regulations, including the ‘Judicial Guide.’” The “elocution of the students” would be bolstered by emphasis on conversation exercises. The candidate second lieutenants had to pass “a writing exercise; a conversation exercise bearing on military theories and regulations; an oral test having

for [its] goal to assure that the candidates are able to understand the defendants and their defense attorneys, to question them in judicial commissions and in courts-martial.” Once graduated, “. . . [i]n the officers’ or NCO’s mess, the exclusive use of the language of the unit cannot be imposed. However, if exceptionally, service communications are made in the locales, they must be made in the unit language.”³⁶

The realization of this law would have important effects on the war-fighting ability of the Belgian Army in May 1940. The lack of qualified Flemish officers, both active and reserve, greatly impacted the effectiveness of the army. Many subaltern officers who had studied in French had to be transferred to Flemish units because of this lack and in Flemish units officers who could not speak Dutch well lacked almost all authority. In addition, to fill the void of qualified Flemings, standards for Flemish officers had to be lowered compared to those of the Walloons. In an early 1939 conversation with General van Overstraeten, the King’s military advisor, Minister Denis complained about

the linguistic pranks of Grammens on the one hand, and the solicitations of which M. Van Cauwelaert [two noted Flemish advocates, passivists in World War I] urges on the other, in order to obtain a promotion of Flemish officers of the reserve to draw from the non-commissioned officers of the reserve judged inept in the course of their service and who now burn to obtain the [rank] star of second lieutenant in order to escape the ordinary and the labors of the troops.

Van Overstraeten himself complained that “of my reserve officers. . . , I can say that a quarter are good, a quarter at most passable, the rest are worth nothing.” In the battle for

³⁶ Letter from *Le Ministre de la Defense Nationale* to *Commandant de l’E.R.M.*, *Objet: Nombre d’élèves des divisions linguistiques de l’E.R.M.*, dated 29 Octobre 1939, MRA-BAFM 157(185-14-189), 19; Sénat de Belgique, *Session de 1939-1940, Séance du 12 Décembre 1939*, “*Rapport sur l’application de la loi du 30 Juillet 1938 concernant l’usage des langues à l’armée*,” No 26, *Ibid.*, 24(185-2-2), XX, pp. 5-6. Chambre des représentants, session de 1936-1937, no 255, *Ibid.*, 24(185-2-2), II, p. 17; “O.O. 2,” from *Le Ministère de la Defense Nationale-Service du Personnel Militaire, 2e Bureau* to “all military authorities up to and including commanders of companies or similar units; to treasury and administrative officers; to all Gendarmerie authorities (up to and including the commanders of cantons),” dated 23 Novembre, 1938, *Ibid.*, 396 (185-14-823), Documents 12, 13; Letter from *Le Ministère de la Defense Nationale-Service du Personnel Militaire* to “all military authorities up to and including commanders of companies or similar units”, dated 27 December, 1938, *ibid.*, Document 6, p. 2.

the important Belgian defense line on the Albert Canal on May 11, 1940, an inexperienced reserve lieutenant left in charge of the rear-guard mistook German reconnaissance for an attack in force and prematurely abandoned the canal. Many of these reserve officers were affected by, or at least did not oppose, Flemish nationalist propaganda, which would be “the cause of the lack of combativeness of certain units.”

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In his December 12, 1939, testimony before the Belgian Senate, Minister Denis addressed the reorganization of units as wholes. Many regiments in their peacetime organizations had their linguistic regime changed to accord with the law. Things got more complicated when the Belgian Army mobilized in August-September 1939. Unilingual regiments could, by reason of the mobilization of old classes of recruit who spoke the other language, become mixed units. Still, the drive was in the other direction. An instruction from the Ministry of National Defense’s Military Personnel Service to “All Military Authorities up to and including Corps commanders” and dated October 20, 1939 instructed those authorities that

- 1) After having created as many unilingual platoons (sections) as necessary, the corps commanders will change the cpls [sic], cpl candidates [sic], and draftees who do not know the language of the soldiers under their orders from their units. . . . The soldiers in numbers insufficient to form a subunit can be proposed to change unit or regiment in the same way as cpls. . . .
- 2) The I[nfantry] D[ivision] commanders (or similar authorities) will dispose of a ten-day delay in order to distribute the candidate sergeants between the corps under their orders. . . .
- 3) After execution of these changes, the cpls eventually supernumary from the linguistic point of view will be passed by their new I.D. commander to another regiment of the same linguistic regime, or to the

³⁷ Chambre des Représentants, *Session de 1936-1937, no 255*, pp. 17, 11, *Ibid.*, 24(185-2-2), II; Crahay, pp. 238-9. Général van Overstraeten, *Albert I-Leopold III: Vingt Ans de Politique Militaire Belge 1930-1940*, Entry for 22 January 1940 (Brussels?: Desclée de Brouwer, ND), p. 380; van Overstraeten quoted in Crahay, p. 237; de Fabribeekers, pp. 222-3; Crahay, p. 34.

[replacement depot] in order to be appointed to the instruction of recruits while waiting to be able to fill a vacancy.

This did not necessarily please the troops. Indeed, the Belgian general staff sent the commander of the III Army Corps a note advising him that it would be impossible to achieve the unity of the linguistic regime in the 3rd, 4th, 8th, and 11th Infantry Divisions as mobilized “without harming unit cohesion” and asking him for instructions. “Example: the cyclist squadrons of the I.D.s are constituted by means of the 5th class of the motorcycle regiments. The 1 Ch[asseurs à] Ch[eval] constitutes the cy[clist] sq[uadron] of the 4 I.D. and 11 I.D.. As the regiment has the unilingual Flemish regime only from the class of 1939, it is only from the moment where the class of 1939 will be the 5th class that the cy. Sq. of the 4 I.D. and 11 I.D. will be able to be unilingually Flemish.” Major-General Baron de Hennin de Boussu Walcourt, an aide-de-camp of King Leopold and commander of the 15th Infantry Division (2nd line reserve), complained about the order to create unilingual platoons, to transfer officers who did not speak the language of their soldiers, and to transfer soldiers who were not numerous enough to have their own unilingual platoons.

This measure has discontended officers, warrant officers, soldiers [both] Flemish and Walloon because all estimate it destructive of the good spirit and camaraderie which unites the soldiers of Flemish expression and of French expression and which all find not indicated.

In effect, the proportion of soldiers of Flemish expression having expressed the desire to be commanded in Flemish is insignificant and the creation of one or two platoons per regiment would have given satisfaction to all. . . . Personally, very numerous times, in the course of my visits to their works, I have noted with pleasure that Flemings and Walloons were happy to rub shoulders with each other. Flemings and Walloons told me: it is well understood. . . .

The constitution of platoons of Flemish expression has broken the ties of camaraderie; numerous Flemish soldiers have expressed their difficulty in having to leave a Walloon [who was] their best comrade of the group.

On the other hand, Capitaine-Commandant [between US Captain and Major] Carette, the commander of the Transport Corps of the 14th Infantry Division, reported on April 15, 1940 that

the C. T. [Transport Corps]/14 D.I. [Infantry Division] includes in its strength 5 Walloon sergeants [*maréchaux des logis*] and 3 Walloon corporals [*brigadiers*]. Among these, 3 sergeants have asked to pass into a C.T. of French expression. The two other sergeants and the 3 corporals are desirous of remaining in the unit but have made no serious effort to learn the Flemish language. From this fact, they experience great difficulties in making themselves understood by the men and a certain discontent manifests itself in the case of these last.

The British military attaché to Belgium weighed in with his opinion that “the passing of the 1938 law removes any real grievance on the part of the Flemings. The linguistic question is not a cause of dissention in the Army, but, a system involving the use of two languages throughout the Army cannot fail to be a source of difficulty and military weakness both in peace and war.”³⁸

On May 10, 1940, Germany invaded Belgium, which was still in the middle of the reorganization mandated by the 1938 language law, due to finish in 1944. The vast majority of Belgian units fought well but, like their French neighbors, the performance of Belgian units could be broken down by year of call-up, with the active units fighting best and the reserve, especially the second-line reserve, units fighting less well. As mentioned above, this was due in part to the lack of qualified Flemish reserve officers. However, especially towards the end of the campaign, there were some desertions among Flemish

³⁸ *Sénot de Belgique, Session de 1939-1940, No. 26, pp. 8, 20*; Letter from the MDN Service du Personnel Militaire to “All Military Authorities up to and including Corps commanders. Object. Use of languages in the army. Constitution of unilingual units or sub-units. Training of unilingual draftees,” Fonds van Overstraeten, Box 2, sous-farde [folder] 20 Oct. (1939), document #535; Note from E.M.G.A. to the Commander of the III C.A., Archive GQG 3/II/8 (at the SGRS-SA); Letter from the 15^{ème} DIVISION D’INFANTERIE/ETAT-MAJOR/ 1er Bureau, dated le 31 Octobre 1939, *Objet: Régime linguistique*, Fonds van Overstraeten, Box 2, sous-farde 31 Octobre (1939), Service Générale de Renseignements-Sécurité-Section/Archive; *Le Commandant du C.T./14 D.I.* to the General Staff commanding the T.S.T., MRA-BAFM 102 (185-14-53), Document 16; 1938 Annual Report, (British) Foreign Office# 371/22871/5540, page 332, MRA-Attaché Militaire Britannique 80/3/XIII.

units which had been affected during the period of mobilization by anti-war and Flemish nationalist propaganda. This was actually made worse by the very law that was supposed to have alleviated it. Because some regions more than others were “contaminated” by Flemish nationalist propaganda “of a clearly racial and antinational character,” regional recruitment and deployment resulted in units susceptible to that propaganda being based close to home, that is, close to the founts of the ideology. On the night of May 9-10, 1940, Staf de Clercq, told seventy-eight of his propagandists to spread in the regiments the instruction ““Do not fire, defect en masse,”” while Joris Van Severen urged his followers to act as the Frontists had in the Great War. On May 19, the Germans came out with two radio messages, one for the Flemings and one for the Walloons. The Flemings were told “[the]more rapidly we occupy the country, [the] better it will be for you. Then there will no longer be war: put down your weapons.” The Walloons heard “[t]he destruction of the army will no longer help the French much. You are sacrificing yourselves for the English and French capitalists. Put down your weapons.” On May 20, 1940, van Overstraeten observed that “it is necessary to handle the morale of the troops, above all Flemish, with tact. Their behavior will be all the better [if] they have the feeling of protecting more Belgian territory.” On May 24, the Flemish Second Line Infantry regiment and Twenty-third Line Infantry regiment were taken by surprise by the German 309th Infantry Regiment at Ronsele on the Derivation Canal. Each Belgian unit lost at least one battalion and the eleventh company of the 23rd broke and abandoned the canal. Although a Belgian counterattack on the 25th threw the Germans back, a Belgian historian argued that “the cowardice of some the previous day cost the lives of thirty Belgian soldiers.”³⁹

³⁹ Général Emile Wanty, *Le Milieu Militaire Belge de 1914 a Nos Jours*, vol. 1 (Bruxelles: Musee Royal de l’Armée et

The same day as the counterattack, at Meighem, units of the Fourth Infantry Division, made up of Flemish units, having lost half its troops on the Albert Canal in the early days of the fighting, poorly equipped, and with low morale, surrendered en masse. These troops, however, had already been seen as problems during the period of mobilization. Leopold himself had visited them on January 22. “The impression is unfavorable, nonchalance of officers, indiscipline of soldiers, disorder, bad will.” Although these troops had reasons other than Flemish nationalism for their “bad will,” propaganda probably also played a role. The prominent Belgian academic J. Wullus-Rudiger noted that “There can be no doubt that the action of the V.N.V. bore fruit in certain units, above all in the course of the last days of combat on the Lys. But the results achieved were much more modest than G. De Clercq pretended.” On May 27, General van Overstraeten discussed the situation with General Oscar Michiels, the Belgian Chief of Staff. For the most part, things were acceptable, but “at II corps, the information lacks precision but the retreat seems limited to the 12th Infantry Division, where certain units. . . have failed in their duty. . . . These successive defections of Flemish troops worry us more than any other event.”⁴⁰

The Frontist movement pushed Flemish grievances to the forefront of Belgian attention while at the same time creating opposition to its aspirations. Nevertheless, reform of the Belgian electoral system and the democratic nature of the country led to attempts of the Belgian governing circles to address Flemish complaints in the years before 1940. The study of these attempts shows the problems a democracy faces in dealing with issues of ethnicity. For every constituency that favored majority rights or

d’Histoire Militaire, 1999), p. 174; de Fabriceckers, *La Campagne de l’Armée Belge en 1940*, 2 ed. (Bruxelles: Rossel, ND), p. 62; Van Overstraeten, pp. 638, 640-1; *Ibid.*, p. 638; de Fabriceckers, pp. 302-4.

⁴⁰ CDHFA, p. 138; de Fabriceckers, pp. 307, 62-3; Wullus-Rudiger, p. 281; Van Overstraeten, pp. 704-5.

simple fairness there was one that either felt the situation was not so bad or, because of real or imagined grievances, refused to accept any changes. This problem was met by the army because the army had to satisfy not only the soldiers but the superior civilian authority representing those soldiers and their compatriots in the government.

Unfortunately, the Belgian efforts were not completed before their great test arrived. Had the Belgians had more time to find and integrate qualified Flemish officers, their war effort would have been more effective because regular Flemish units would have had their recommended complement of “active” officers. Reserve Flemish units would have been better led because the army would not have had to lower standards to attract warm bodies to staff those units. In addition, morale would have been higher and Flemish soldiers would have fought harder had they felt themselves truly equal citizens of the country they were defending and had they had time to rebuild unit cohesion in all the units affected by the personnel changes imposed by the 1938 language law.

Chapter 3: Domestic Politics

Belgian domestic politics, going beyond the Flemish-Walloon controversy, but not completely divorced from it, significantly affected Belgian defense policy. From the mid-1920s, and especially during the Depression, there were demands for extreme economy in the military. At the same time Belgians became aware of the increasing German threat and were, with the significant exceptions at first of the Socialists and the Flemish nationalists, increasingly interested in building up the military that had been allowed to languish under the pressure for economies. Thus, in domestic policy, as we will see later in foreign and military policy, the fear of Germany would come to dominate the list of concerns.⁹⁰

This chapter will look at how domestic politics played out, especially during the watershed year of 1936 when a mixed commission of parliamentarians and soldiers met to examine Belgium's military needs, May elections surprisingly brought increased representations to fascists (the "Rexists") the Flemish nationalists (mainly, but not exclusively, the *Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond*), and the Communists at the expense of the three traditional parties, and Leopold announced the "new" policy of independence. Meanwhile, ordinary Belgians were becoming increasingly concerned about the rise of the extremist parties and about the Franco-Soviet Pact, increasing German aggressiveness, and the Spanish Civil War. "The demands of domestic policy now paralleled those of foreign policy." As international events were pushing Belgium away from commitments, domestic concerns were making it increasingly important for Belgium not to be seen as favoring one side of the looming fascist-Communist conflict.

⁹⁰ The perception of the German threat and other foreign policy matters by Belgian diplomats will be discussed in the next chapter.

The French, having ratified a treaty with the Soviets, counted among the latter. Historian Jane Kathryn Miller argues that “from [the time of Leopold’s October 14, 1936 speech] on, the security of Belgium was the most absorbing question in politics. The Flemish issue, the Rexist agitation, social and economic problems, all were considered primarily in regard to their effect on the safety of the nation.”⁹¹

A. The Great Depression and defense policy

In 1932, Belgium was suffering the worst of the Great Depression which had hit the country towards the end of 1930. Belgian industrial production, on which Wallonia depended and which was fueled in part with Flemish labor, collapsed, dropping from 140 in 1929 (with 100 representing 1923) to only 108 in the mid-1930s while industrial activity in 1934 represented only 67% of that of 1929. Unemployment soared to new heights and overproduction brought collapsing prices and investments. Businesses went bust while at first the Catholic-Liberal government, unconvinced of the magnitude of the threat, refused to intervene in the economy. When they finally acted, they adopted a deflationary policy which lowered prices and wages and attempted to stabilize the Franc, all with the goal of spurring exports. Unfortunately, other countries were trying the same thing, so there was little impact on the depression. Even some of Belgium’s most prominent businesses were threatened with bankruptcy.⁹²

The drop in real wages, pensions, and unemployment benefits led to a wave of Communist-supported strikes in the Walloon industrial region of the Borinage, in which two workers were killed. The Socialist unions had stood outside the strikes. After the collapse of the strikes, the Communists called for “united fronts,” ready for a general

⁹¹ Kieft, p. 105; Miller, p. 52.

⁹² Kossmann, p. 629; Witte *et al.*, pp. 136-7.

strike, in anti-union factories. Meanwhile, the POB was experiencing internal dissent as a new generation of socialists, also in favor of the general strike to create a “Socialist society,” came onto the scene.⁹³

Among these “Young Turks” gathered around the *Socialist Action* magazine were Paul-Henri Spaak, who would go on to become foreign minister and then prime minister and who will be discussed in more detail next chapter, and Henri de Man, a doctor of history and philosophy, a commissioned veteran of World War I, and a former professor in Frankfurt, who left Germany after Hitler’s ascent to power. While still in Germany, he had written *Beyond Marxism*, in which he called for a socialism free from the obsolete ideas of Marxism. He called for a “national socialism,” which *is not* to be confused with German National Socialism. He did not see a class struggle so much as a fight between “investment capitalism and its victims: workers, farmers, small merchants and employees.” He called for the Socialists to create a new, positive class identity and a new culture to replace “bourgeois hegemony.” He favored a corporatist approach to the economy. His ideas appalled the Socialist “old guard,” who complained bitterly while recognizing the success of his and Spaak’s ideas.⁹⁴

In 1933, de Man came up with “The Labor Plan.” In this Plan, he called for a Keynesian response to the financial crisis: inflation, public works (as in Germany and the United States), and the nationalization of significant sectors of the economy, giving the government the power to intervene in the economy, especially against the banks. The Plan would keep private property. Despite its non-Marxist character, most young socialists supported the Plan. However, the Plan was never implemented, even when de

⁹³ Witte, *et al.*, pp. 137, 142.

⁹⁴ Witte, *et al.*, pp. 142-143.

Man himself served as Public Works and Employment Minister in 1935 or as Finance Minister in the second van Zeeland government in 1936; it had no appeal to non-Socialists and was fought by capitalist ministers as well as by the “conservative” wing of his own party. Disappointed, de Man became increasingly authoritarian and found himself one of Leopold’s most trusted advisors, who urged Socialists to rally around the king after May 1940, and who created a unified labor union under the Nazis. Eventually, the failure of this union, added to de Man’s patriotism and monarchism, led him to flee to Switzerland.⁹⁵

Meanwhile, the Socialists were making their feelings about the new Nazi regime in Germany clear. On May Day, 1933, according to the German news service the Wolff Agency, Socialists, angered at the display of the Nazi banner for “the festival of German labor” tore up a “Hitlerian” flag and broke windows at the German consulate in Liège. The actions were condemned by the Belgian government (after a protest by the German minister in Brussels) and by the Belgian press. This demonstration was not unique. In May, stevedores in Antwerp refused to off-load two German ships after they raised the swastika flag. In that case, the port authorities and the Socialist syndicates intervened to quickly end the demonstration. In June, Count de Kerchove de Denterghem, the Belgian minister in Berlin, reported three more anti-German attacks in Belgium and

permit[ted himself] to draw all the attention of the King’s government to the necessity. . . of calm[ing] the excitability of public opinion against Germany. Certainly, nobody more than I fully understands the legitimate worry the pretensions to German rearmament and the inadmissible nationalist propaganda infecting the Germanic nation must provoke in Belgium. Nobody more than I follows with worry the development of the Hitlerian pan-Germanist program. But between a legitimate discontentment of government to government and the explosion of popular

⁹⁵ Witte, *et al.*, p. 143; Kossmann, p. 616; Jean Vanwelkenhuyzen, *1936: Leopold III, Degrelle, van Zeeland et les autres*. . . (Brussels: Racine, 2004), p. 31, ff.1, 2.

anger there is a great margin and the government of the King has every interest in not threatening its efforts to draw German tourists into Belgium by running the risk of these latter being molested or worried or of being the cause of extremely harmful incidents.

That December, the ministerial director of the German Foreign Office (*Auswärtiges Amt*) complained to Minister Kerchove about a Socialist campaign to boycott German goods and about a play in Antwerp called “*Der Blutkanzler*,”⁹⁶ whose poster “represents the Chancellor of the Reich greatly deformed above a swastika streaming blood.”⁹⁷

At this same time, as we will see in more detail in chapter five, Belgian military power was at its nadir. Belgians gripped by the Depression were unwilling “to make the sacrifices necessary for effective defence. The fact is that in the early 1930s, the Belgian army was undermanned and underequipped; its fortifications were weak; its morale was low. However, there were ideological reasons as well for the reluctance to build up the military. The Socialists and the left wing of the Catholic party, the Christian Democrats, who were predominantly Flemish, had long traditions of “anti-militarism. Socialist internationalism, Christian pacifism, a reluctance to compel large families to bear the heavy burden of conscription, and the desire to use available funds for other purposes were part of Flemish and Socialist thinking. . . . What little concern for national defense remained was weakened further by the Depression.” In addition, Germany was not yet perceived to be a major threat. On July 28, 1934, Prime Minister de Broqueville informed Colonel Raoul van Overstraeten that “before long we will have absolutely nothing to fear; that peace is assured, that one could thus, in view of the financial distress of the country, reduce the time of service towards six months. . . .” Colonel van Overstraeten’s

⁹⁶ “The Chancellor of Blood”; Hitler’s title at that time was Chancellor.

⁹⁷ Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, May 4, 1933, pp. 1-4, in AMBAE 11179, *farde* 1933; Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, May 19, 1933, in *ibid.*; Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, June 8, 1933, pp. 1,3, in *ibid.*; Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, December 18, 1933, pp. 1-2, in *ibid.*

reaction: “I remain stunned.” Service time for draftees was then generally eight months, meaning that, because two classes under arms did not overlap, the Belgian army was only at full strength from April to October (the presumed campaigning season). At the same time, the Belgian army was facing serious manpower shortfalls as a delayed result of the slaughter of the Great War. Although the law called for annual contingents of 44,000, the class of 1935 was estimated to be only 40,000, with the next class being 35,000, and dropping dramatically until 1939, when the draft would crawl up to 34,000. A law was passed in 1933 allowing the government to deal with all five classes at once, swapping men between years to assure a “barely sufficient” 33,000 per year. There was also a relaxation of standards. Still, in 1934, things were looking up: the elite *Chasseurs ardennais* and Frontier Cyclists units were being formed to defend Belgium’s eastern frontier, the motorization of the Cavalry Corps was being debated, and the Parliament voted extraordinary credits of 760 million Francs to improve the army and its fortifications. The next year saw the beginning of the motorization of the Cavalry Corps in earnest.⁹⁸

On March 25, 1935, a new government was formed led by a “technician” (an individual not affiliated with any party), Paul van Zeeland, an economist, professor, and former vice-governor of the *Banque Nationale*. The explicit goal of the new regime was to fix the Belgian economy. Van Zeeland headed a tripartite government of the Catholics, Liberals, and Socialists. Among the new ministers were Paul-Henri Spaak, as Minister of Transport and Communications, and Henri de Man as Finance Minister. Van Zeeland reorganized the banks, devalued the Franc, and fought unemployment. At this time,

⁹⁸ Kieft, pp. 40-1; diary entry for July 28 [1934], in van Overstraeten, p. 123; Kieft, p. 45; Diary entry for April 18, [1934], in van Overstraeten, p. 111..

Minister of National Defense Devèze and the chief of staff, Lieutenant General Cumont, wanted to raise the term of service of the draftees from twelve months to eighteen months for some branches and to sixteen months for others. However, Premier van Zeeland rejected the idea because it would adversely affect Belgium's economic restoration and because he believed it was unnecessary due to the lack of any immediate danger of war. Van Zeeland's efforts succeeded in restoring the economy and Belgium could start worrying more about foreign affairs.⁹⁹

In February, 1936, Minister Devèze put a bill before the Parliament to increase service time to eighteen months in order to end the system in which the Belgian frontier was inadequately garrisoned five months out of the year. The Socialists, who claimed to support a strong defense and wondered why troop strength, considered satisfactory a year ago, was now so desperately lacking, felt Devèze, a Liberal politician, had deliberately not mentioned this earlier in order to lure them into van Zeeland's coalition government.¹⁰⁰

The resounding rejection among Socialists of eighteen months service led to a resolution demanding the issue be taken up by a mixed commission. In this, they were supported by Flemish Catholics. The main Flemish newspaper, *De Standaard*, noted that an election was upcoming and suggested that Devèze's actions were part of the Liberal Party's looking for a platform. The Socialists opined that Belgium needed a strong defense but also needed to stay apart from any alliance system like the one which had caused the Great War. The Franco-Belgian Agreement must either be published or

⁹⁹ Luykx, Prof. Dr. Th. And M. Platel, *Politieke Geschiedenis van België*, vol. 2 "Van 1944 tot 1985" (Antwerp: Kluwer rechtswetenschappen, 1985), p. 938; Kossmann, pp. 666-7; Vanwelkenhuyzen, 1936, p. 13, ff1, 26, ff. 1; Witte, *et al.*, p. 137; Diary entry for July 20, 1935, in van Overstraeten, pp. 168-9.

¹⁰⁰ Kieft, pp. 45-8.

denounced. The Socialist old guard leader, Émile Vandervelde, suggested that Devèze planned to link the Belgian Army to the French one. This was a particularly significant assertion because the 1935 Franco-Soviet Pact caused many Belgians to fear that France would be drawn into a war for the interests of the generally disliked Bolsheviks and that because of the Franco-Belgian Agreement, Belgium would be sucked in despite itself.

The Walloon daily *Le Libre Belgique* wrote

. . . if one segment of our opinion—which does not include Flemings only—desires the denunciation of the agreement of 1920, it is . . . because the international situation appears singularly more troubled than fifteen years ago; it is because the policy of eastern alliances pursued by France and especially the Franco-Soviet Pact threaten to involve our southern neighbor in perilous military adventures; and, in the last analysis [it is because][*sic*] many Belgians fear seeing our country herself entangled in the wake of France in the dreadful cog-wheels of a war from which we ought to remain far removed.

In response to Vandervelde, Devèze, “not the man to leave criticism unanswered,” responded that his plan was exclusively defensive and Belgian and had nothing to do with the 1920 accord. Moreover, the international situation was worsening (Germany had announced the creation of an air force, the institution of conscription, and the expansion of the German army to thirty-six divisions in the past year). If Belgium wanted its eastern and northern frontiers adequately protected without expanding the time of service, the southern and western frontiers would be left virtually wide open. In the end, Devèze’s bill crashed in flames, having been shot down by the Socialists, Flemish nationalists, Flemish Catholics, and the Communists.¹⁰¹

The Belgian attempts to reach a mutual denunciation of the Franco-Belgian accord will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Suffice it here to mention that

¹⁰¹*De Standaard*, quoted in Kieft, p. 46; *Le Peuple*, cited in *ibid*; *ibid.*, pp. 50-1; *Le Libre Belgique*, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 51; *ibid.*, p. 48.

the Belgians were successful the day before the Germans defied the world and remilitarized the Rhineland. Ordinary Belgians were surprised but calm. They did not demand immediate and drastic action. They argued that the German justification—that the Franco-Soviet Treaty violated Locarno so Germany was no longer bound by it—had some merit and that in any case, the Rhineland could not remain demilitarized indefinitely.¹⁰²

B. The 1936 “Commission Mixte”

On March 25, King Leopold ordered the formation of a “mixed commission.” The commission consisted of twenty parliamentarians and eleven senior officers. They were “to study the current state of the army as well as the necessities of the effective defense of the territory and to propose all measures of reorganization which [the Commission] judges opportune.” The results of this commission directly shaped the Belgian Army that fought in May 1940 and the debates of this commission reveal the concerns not only of the Belgian soldiers but also of the domestic policymakers responsible to their electors and of the senators. It thus also reveals the concerns of the Belgian public. Indeed, the British Military Attaché, Major D.K. Paris, reported that “I have been informed that there is a considerable slackness in attendance at the sittings of the Mixed Commission, and certain of the members only attend in order to put forward proposals which will be popular to their own electors.”¹⁰³

The Commission could summon any civilian or soldier it felt could provide it with needed information. Its immediate cause was, as Commission President M. Hubin

¹⁰² Kieft, pp. 58-9.

¹⁰³ Crahay, p. 172; King Lèopold III quoted in Discours de M. Le President Hubin, Commission Mixte, Séance d’Installation, 22 avril, 1936, pp. 7-8, in MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), *sous-farde* “Documents relatifs à l’élaboration des Cffes.R.”; D.K. Paris to Sir Esmond Ovey, Brussels, August 7, 1936, p. 3, in MRA-AMB 80/3/XIII.

pointed out, Minister of National Defense Albert Devèze's opinion that the army's coverage of the country "no longer responded perfectly to the goal which is assigned to it, that is to say, to guarantee and cover the mobilization and the eventual concentration of the Army." In addition, the Belgian public was increasingly worried about the armament and equipment of its army and about the "*real or apparent* divergence of views existing in military circles in what concerns the general conception of the defense of the country [emphasis in the original]." The commission would have to inform itself on these issues, especially "on these points which are particularly of a nature to raise empoisoned discussions," enlighten the public on the state of armaments and equipment and either "congratulate itself" if the debate was only a quarrel over words or state its opinion if there were real issues at stake.¹⁰⁴

The commission met for the first time on April 22, at 10:25am. Minister Devèze opened the proceedings by quoting his predecessor's speech opening the 1927-'28 mixed commission, which ended, "I express here my absolute faith in your experience and in your enlightened wisdom. . . . Thanks to your labor, the representatives of the nation, duly instructed by the conclusions that you will put forward could, in full knowledge of the cause, take your responsibilities. The Government hopes that the hour of action does not delay." The 1936 Commission would take the 1927-8 Commission as its "starting point."¹⁰⁵

One of the central reasons for the formation of the commission was to determine the length of active service for Belgian soldiers. This question was intimately linked with

¹⁰⁴ Albert Devèze cited in Commission Mixte, Séance d'Installation, 22 avril, 1936, p.8, in MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), *sous-farde* "Documents relatifs à l'élaboration des Cffes.R."

¹⁰⁵ Discours de M. Devèze, *ibid.*, pp. 1-3.

the issues of the effective coverage of the frontier, the provision of sufficient NCOs, technicians, and military employees, the equipping of the troops with “an armament and an equipment perfectly appropriate to the necessities of modern war,” and the improved training of the soldiers. The Commission also had to look into the recruitment and retention of junior officers, the possible increase in and encouragement of physical and military education, and how to make the reserve units readier to fight immediately should war break out. However, the most immediate question was the assurance of the coverage of the frontier:

Its solution is commanded by the constant presence, in place, of instructed effectives, capable by their number, their preparation, and their armament, of opposing at all times to the sudden eruption an impassible dike. The inexistence of this dike or its insufficiency compromises the mobilization and the concentration of our forces; they render inoperative all the sacrifices of people and of money that the country grants to its security.

The evolution, since 1928, of the technology of armies; *the rearmament of Germany, official since 1935; the military reoccupation of the Rhineland, effective since last March*—all these circumstances give to the question an incontestably new aspect [my emphasis].¹⁰⁶

The Commission would also consider whether the recommendations of the 1931 Commission on Fortifications to prepare Belgium’s two main physical lines of defense, the Meuse and Scheldt rivers, were still valid given the new conditions. The preparation would involve the modernization of the old forts guarding the Meuse around Liège and Namur. The Antwerp forts guarding the Scheldt needed renovation. Other suggestions included a call for the new fortress of Eben-Emael to block a German thrust between Liège and Dutch Limburg and building a bridgehead around Ghent (the “TPG”). Also under debate were the conclusions of the Superior Council of Defense regarding “the zone close to the frontier”: create a 60km-long main position for the army on the Herve

¹⁰⁶ Discours de M. Devèze, *ibid.*, pp. 1-3.

plateau near Liège by building new forts (some of which were finished by 1936) and establish “centers of resistance” in Belgian Luxembourg, which had been done and which were to be defended by the newly created *Chasseurs ardennais*. Finally, as we saw in the last chapter, the Commission would consider the linguistic regime in the army, as well as regional recruitment, and “all that touches the moral and material well-being of the soldier.”¹⁰⁷

Minister Devèze closed by exhorting the Commission: “May your work, in these hours so grave, have for effect to unite in a common will the country, which is grasped by so many worries; the Parliament, all the tendencies of which you represent here with so much authority and the Army, so profoundly imbued with all its duties, so generously ready to give its blood, as in 1914 for the health of Belgium.” He also reread his conclusion in Flemish.¹⁰⁸

The president of the commission, Socialist Deputy G. Hubin, then spoke, laying out what he perceived to be the reasons for the commission. He closed by observing that

it is not true that to have peace it is necessary to prepare for war, but it is profoundly true that the best system of conserving the peace is, with the firm will of not troubling it ourselves, a powerful defensive system which does not permit an eventual aggressor to hope to be able to profit from its aggression.

The objective to which your commission must devote itself is to submit to the government directives which reach this goal. (*Very good! Very good! Unanimous marks of approbation.* [emphasis in the original])¹⁰⁹

The Flemish question now raised itself as President Hubin acknowledged the criticism of his appointment as president because he did not speak Flemish, even

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 4-6.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 6

¹⁰⁹ Crahay, p. 172; Discours de M. le President Hubin, Commission Mixte, Séance d’Installation, 22 avril, 1936, p. 9, in MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), *sous-farde* “Documents relatifs à l’élaboration des Cffes.R.”

admitting his own doubts as to his competence but promising his dedication. He also proposed the selection of a Flemish vice-president, a role assigned to Senator Overbergh.¹¹⁰

The commission also discussed when to meet; settling on one day a week (Tuesday) but debate centered on when they would begin their work. The goal, as M. Hubin pointed out, was to give the report to the Government in enough time for it to draft necessary laws by the beginning of the Parliamentary session in October. The commission would start in June and work for four months, “taking into account the month of vacation for which the moment will be decided in opportune time.” However, Deputy Balthazar complained about the impression that would be left on the public if the commission were to defer its work until after the upcoming May elections. He argued it would be better to start immediately. Senator Bologne seconded him, noting that “public opinion, justly preoccupied with the question of security, would not understand a more prolonged adjournment [than fifteen days]” Senator van Overbergh and former prime minister and defense minister de Broqueville agreed. The latter observed, “opinion is worried and it is important to reassure it. I therefore ask that we try to finish quickly, because the decisions that we take cannot be executed without delay. Let’s thus work quickly.” He also identified the most important questions: “the best means of protecting ourselves against a motorized invasion and against an aerial attack! It is on this essential point that our debates must revolve.” They would meet again on Tuesday, May 5, at 2:30pm and work until 6.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ *Ordre des Travaux*, *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10; M. Balthazar in *Ibid.*, p. 10; M. Bologne in *ibid.*, p. 11; various, *ibid.*, pp. 10-11, 16.

The commission heard expert testimony from the military. Major Paris, the British military attaché, noted dryly, “[a]s many of the civilian members of the Commission were extremely ignorant of the technicalities of the whole question, this educational period has taken some considerable time.” Various generals and Minister of National Defense Devèze weighed in on the issue of coverage. Devèze’s plan, based on eighteen months service for recruits, called for nine battalions (“provisional battalions,” “*bataillons de marche*”) plus machine-gun battalions and anti-tank units provided with 4.7cm anti-tank guns. The units would be formed in regiments by using the instructed class which had already served for one year. While serving as coverage, its draftees would not count towards the strength of the mobilized regiment, leaving three earlier classes to form it. “For example: If the class of 1935 of a regiment constitutes a provisional battalion, the mobilized regiment will be constituted by the classes 1934, 1933, 1932.”¹¹²

The plan called for “supplemental” officers and NCOs who would serve permanently with coverage units. These battalions would need to be armed and equipped separately from their parent regiments. A potential drawback was that there would be no trained effectives behind the provisional battalions. Under Minister Devèze’s plan the most recently trained soldiers would all be separate from the rest of the regiment, which would be formed only of reservists who would not be able to avail themselves of the knowledge (and energy?) of the youngsters serving on the frontier.¹¹³

¹¹² D.K. Paris to Sir Edmond Ovey, Brussels, August 7, 1936, p. 1, in MRA-AMB 80/3/XIII, #164; “Système préconisé par Monsieur DEVEZE” for the Commission Mixte 1936, p. 1, in MRA-BAFM 5496 (185-14a-7095), #518.

¹¹³ Ibid.

Tabel I te bijvoegen aan bladzijde 518 (Vlaamse tekst),

Tableau I.

Tabel I.

*Bataillon de marche envoyé à la frontière.
 Marschbataljon aan de grens gestuurd.*

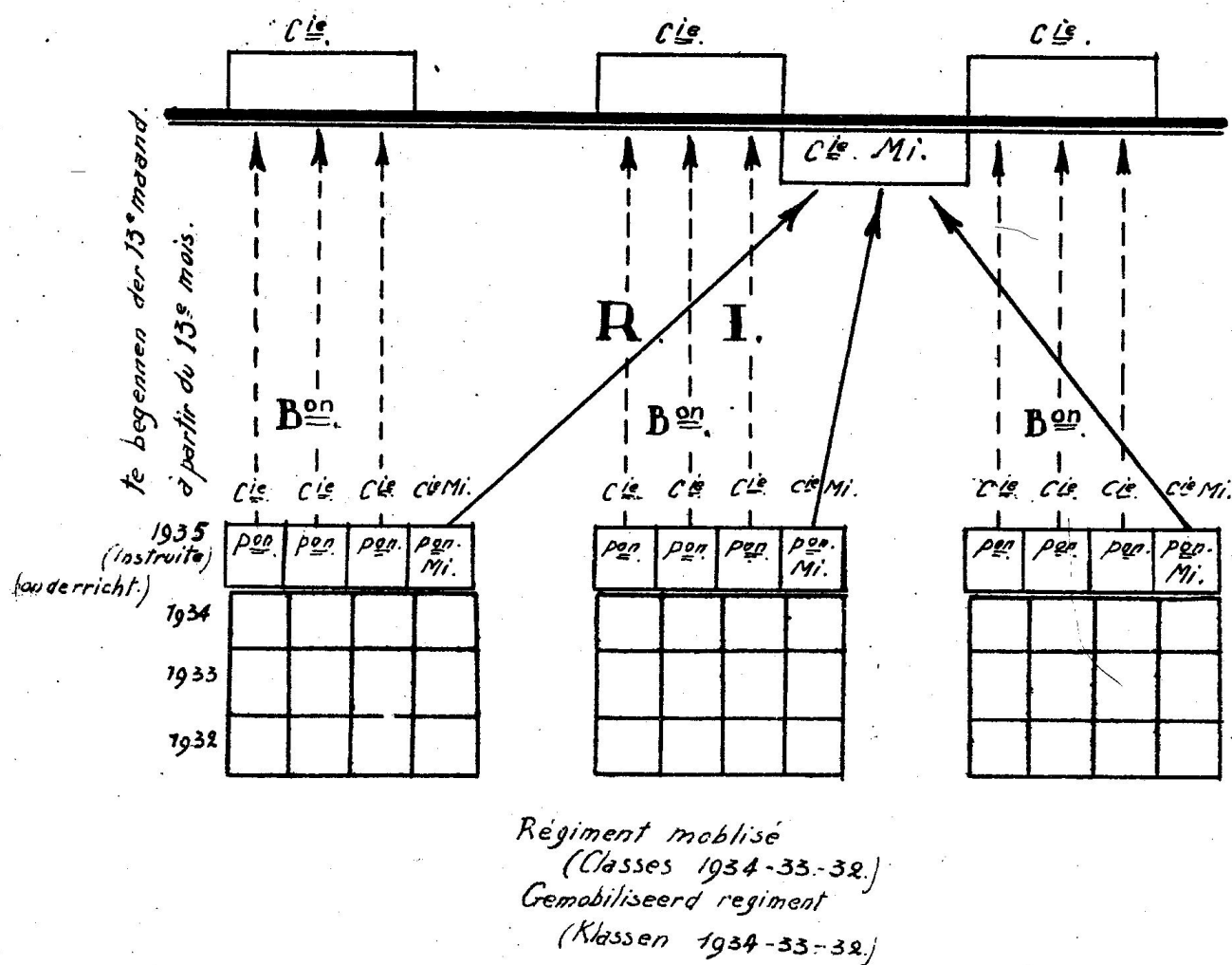


Figure 1: Devèze's coverage plan, after #518, MRA-BAFM 5496 (185-14a-7095).

The chief of the general staff, Lieutenant-General Edouard Van den Bergen, weighed in with his own suggestion, also taking eighteen months service as his point of departure. He agreed with Minister Devèze on the nine necessary battalions (with support). The battalions would come from units based near the coverage positions and again would be formed by the most recently instructed class, but after only six months of training. General Van den Bergen's mobilized regiments would consist of three classes, *but would include the provisional battalions in their organization*. Each mobilized company would start with only two platoons, the third being devoted to coverage. This latter would then rejoin the rest of the company. "For example: If the class of 1935 of a regiment in garrison in proximity to the coverage position constitutes the Coverage Battalion formed by this regiment, the classes [of] 1934 and 1933 would constitute the mobilized regiment. The companies will initially have only two platoons (classes 1934 and 1933)." This would ensure "trained effectives in the interior of the country" and would not require any extra weapons or equipment because the provisional battalions would be integral parts of the regiments.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ "Système préconisé par le Lieutenant Général VAN DEN BERGEN" to the Commission Mixte 1936, p. 1, in in MRA-BAFM 5496 (185-14a-7095), #519.

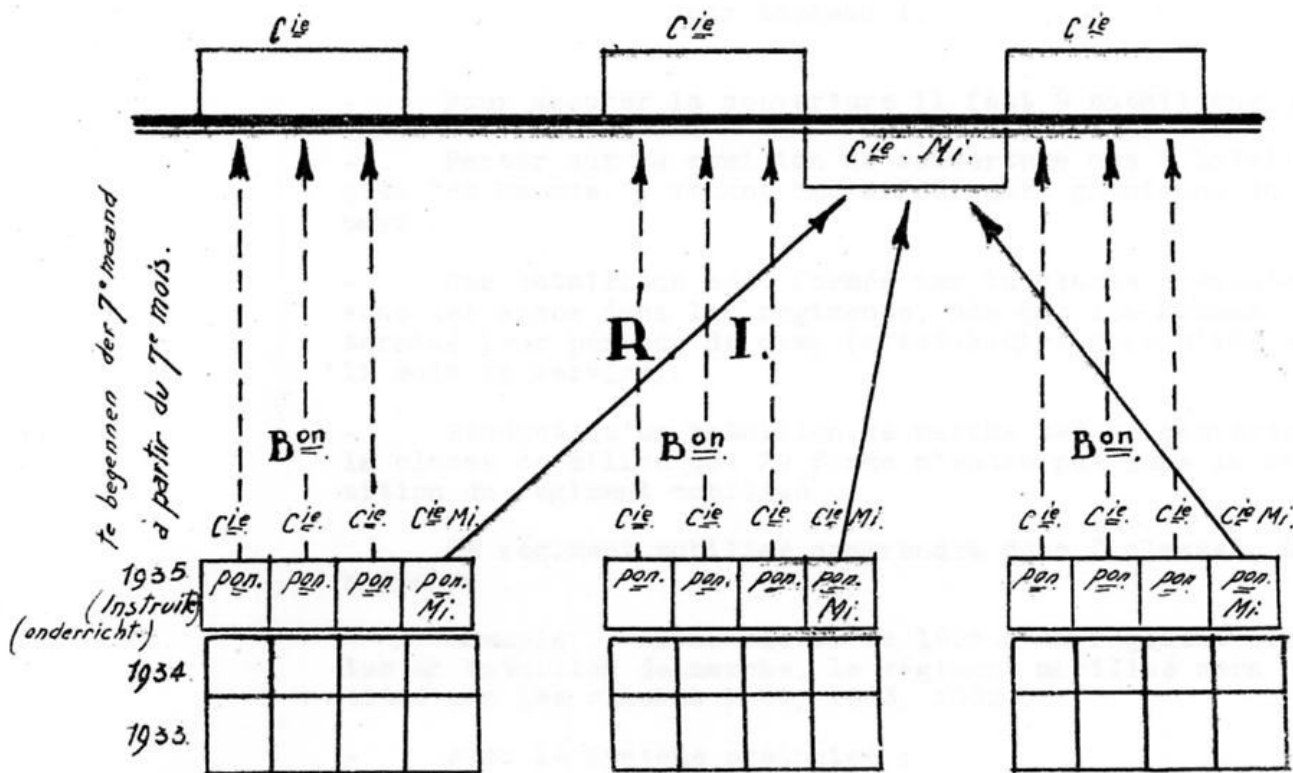
Tabel II te bijvoegen aan bladzijde 519 (Vlaamse tekst).

Tableau II.

Tabel II.

Bataillon en couverture.

Bataljon in dekking.



Régiment mobilisé. (Classes 1935-34.-33.)

Cie a 2 Pons initialement.

Gemobiliseerd regiment. (Klassen 1935-34.-33.)

Cie met 2 Pons aanvankelijk.

Figure 2 Van den Bergen's coverage plan; after #519, MRA-BAFM 5496 (185-14a-7095)

Major-General Duvivier, the commandant of the *Défense Aérienne du Territoire*, Belgian military aviation, weighed in on behalf of Lieutenant-General Van den Bergen, citing two major advantages of his plan: the covering troops, all trained, would be “completely independent from the field army.” They would always be ready, even in deepest peace, to react to an attack with little warning. “By way of consequence, the field army instructs the draftees in peacetime, mobilizes itself completely in the interior of the country, in the shelter of this coverage, and at a safe distance from the latter.” Because the covering troops would be independent of the field army, they would not need to be kept in garrisons and could remain in their positions, with casernes as close as possible to those positions. Because they were already trained, they could devote all their time and energy to performing their duties on the land they were to defend. “Staying there for only a relatively limited number of months, one could be more demanding in their regard: make them be on guard in their pillboxes, make them do numerous alert exercises, and one can be assured that the positions will be occupied in the minimum time possible, which is indispensable.” He reminded the commission that the number of provisional battalions that could be raised would depend in part on the length of service—another major issue for the commission. Six battalions could be raised with sixteen months of service, nine with eighteen months with the colors, and eighteen with two years in uniform. Alternately, if the soldiers were so assigned after only ten months of training, twelve battalions could be raised with eighteen months service.¹¹⁵

General Duvivier saw several flaws in Minister Devèze’s plan: the covering troops would be assigned after only six months with the colors, meaning they would have

¹¹⁵ Attachment to Duvivier to Van den Bergen, Brussels, July 18, 1936, pp. 1-3, in MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), *sous-farde* “Documentation.”

to be completing their training while on the covering positions, raising the possibility that they could be hit before they were fully prepared. “They are troops without sufficient cohesion, incapable of maneuvering, and barely, or not, knowing how to shoot.”

Although they would spend a full year in their positions, some of that time would be spent in camp, not on coverage. Moreover, they would live in existing casernes far removed from their alert positions. Minister Devèze’s plan called for the covering units to rejoin their parent regiments after their covering assignment ended. However, General Duvivier pointed out that if the much feared mechanized invasion occurred, it would be “very optimistic” to assume that these covering units could reintegrate with their regiments with their weapons and officers and NCOs intact. The troops that made it back would be “reduced in number, physically and morally spent, and momentarily unusable.” In addition, the covering mission would not end because the invasion would not end. Thus, three of Belgium’s most valuable divisions would lose a third of their effectives before even seeing action. In response to the complaint that the system of provisional battalions would leave regiments in the interior deprived of effectives, General Duvivier responded that if nine provisional battalions (recommended by General Van den Bergen) were used, drawn from nine regiments, the other nine would have a class with six months instruction—just like the covering troops in Minister Devèze’s scheme. Thus, it would be a wash; either way, troops with six months training could find themselves in action.¹¹⁶

General Duvivier shared the general orthodoxy that the most dangerous direction for Belgian defense, *assuming Liège was properly defended*, was via Dutch Limburg on the Belgian left. In responding to criticism that Belgian defense policy was unilateral, that is, oriented against a German invasion, he reminded the commission that in 1914 the

¹¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 3-6.

army concentrated one stage further west than planned in order not to offend Germany and that two divisions were even kept in Mons and Ghent in case the British landed on the French coast. Of course, the German ultimatum changed things, “[b]ut we were neutral at that time, we could not act otherwise. We are no longer so today. We have international engagements for ourselves, we must take realities such as they are, see the danger where it is and not weaken ourselves and compromise our situation for conventional questions.” He concluded by reminding the commission that the main goal of coverage was to buy time and space to permit the effective mobilization and concentration of the field army and that to achieve that goal, the covering forces had to be independent of the field army. “In my opinion, only the system of provisional battalions responds to this desideratum, given the impossibility of realizing the latter with the aid of volunteers.”¹¹⁷

Lieutenant-General De Grox, without recommending a specific coverage plan beyond agreeing with General Van den Bergen that the current system of entrusting certain key frontier points to draftees on leave was very dangerous and advocating “*complete and permanent* [emphasis in the original]” coverage making liberal use of “*destructions and obstructions*” to delay and disperse a powerful invasion possibly coming without any previous warning, was emphatic in his warnings to the commission of the danger of a German attack. He reminded the commission that although Belgians would not invade a small peaceful country out of the blue, Germany had done it to them

¹¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 2, 5,6. The Frontier Cyclist units and most of the *Chasseurs ardennais* responsible for defending Belgium’s border with Germany were volunteers.

only twenty-two years before, justifying it with the infamous saying “*Not kennt kein Gebot*” (“need knows no law”).¹¹⁸

He warned of the prevalent German spirit, so similar to that of 1914, “as a juridical justification of war unleashed without any previous declaration; and even war beginning in full peacetime” to achieve German aims including keeping destruction and devastation away from Germany, disrupting enemy mobilization and concentration, seizing enemy positions before destructions can be carried out, seizing the most important Belgian industrial regions around Liège and Limburg, and keeping enemy forces away from the most important German industrial region of the Ruhr. He noted that Germany was building an army suitable for the spirit prevailing in the land, capable of such sudden and powerful invasions, including six armored divisions.¹¹⁹

He cited what contemporary German military thinkers were writing about the next war. These authors included a Colonel Siebert from a German military school, who noted that motorization permitted a new speed of operations that would allow bomber fleets to be launched a bare fifteen minutes after the head of state had decided to unleash them, “without waiting for any other diplomatic formality, because five minutes later he would have already lost the benefit of surprise.” German Colonel Jürgen von Arnim (who would go on to command all Axis forces in Africa and to surrender those forces in Tunisia) expressed himself similarly, emphasizing the suddenness of concentration and invasion allowed by “mechanization and motorization.” General Erich von Ludendorff, a German hero of the Great War had recently written “it is an error to believe, as is generally supposed, that a war must necessarily commence with a declaration of war.” A Colonel

¹¹⁸ “Note du Lieutenant Général de Grox sur le problème de la couverture”, to the Mixed Commission of 1936, pp.1- 3, 8, in MRA-BAFM 5496 (185-14a-7095).

¹¹⁹ De Grox, pp. 3-5.

Heinz Suderian [*sic!* Should be “Guderian”] outlined his vision of a powerful surprise one-two punch of bombers and armor flattening enemy industrial regions and disrupting enemy command and control with motorized infantry units occupying the territory seized by the armor so the latter could advance once again. Colonel Walther Nehring (who would command the *Afrika Korps* under Erwin Rommel and be replaced by von Arnim in Tunisia) had described a future armored invasion carried out by “the armies of tomorrow.” General De Grox’s final witness was General Hans Von Seeckt, the genius behind the evolution of the *Reichswehr*, who “will show us that from before the current motorization and mechanization of the German army, this tenacious and energetic renovator of the *Reichswehr* had already admitted, as an adequate doctrine for this army, the principle of the surprise attack.”¹²⁰

General De Grox warned of the possible use of commandos in civilian clothing and of paratroopers, both of which would be used against the Benelux nations in May 1940. Given all this, he concluded, Belgium must not content itself with “half measures” or “the indispensable minimum” but must “provide for the ‘maxima possible’ as much in what concerns the moral valor and professional training of our troops as in that which regards the quality of our armament. If not, it would be better to renounce the struggle.” He closed by reminding the commission of the need for “*a sure, efficacious, permanent coverage* and not a system which would present gaps or defects of functions [which are] generators of catastrophes [emphasis in the original].”¹²¹

Lieutenant-General Hellebaut, one of Belgium’s leading soldiers and Minister of National Defense in 1925, wrote a long memorandum on “Our Security” for the

¹²⁰ De Grox, pp. 5-7; *The Simon and Schuster Encyclopedia of World War II*, Thomas Parrish, ed., (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1978), s.v. “Arnim, Jürgen von”; *ibid.*, s.v. “Nehring, Walther von”.

¹²¹ De Grox, pp. 8-9, 11.

commission. In it, he called for the constitution of an army composed of eighteen divisions *of equal value* that would defend the length of the frontier (300km) on a continuous front, as opposed to the conception of Chiefs of Staff Galet and Nuyten, who proposed the concentration of the army along the axis of advance of the enemy and the creation of successive lines of defense based on Belgium's few natural defenses. Among General Hellebaut's suggestions were proposals for measures to speed mobilization and concentration, which would make coverage less important because it would have to buy less time.¹²²

Hellebaut further recommended allowing draftees to keep military equipment at home to save time spent distributing that equipment in depots and to economize on personnel who would staff those depots and super-regional recruitment to allow mobilization centers to be placed closer to the zones the troops would occupy, which would save on transport. He suggested using not only the railroad for troop transport but also the road network, which, he claimed was underutilized and could serve for many purposes as efficiently as the railroads. He cited as a positive example Hitler's *Autobahnen*. His proposed continuous front would also save time on transport because each unit would have an assigned sector from peacetime and would know where it was going when it was mobilized and concentrated, avoiding delays caused by the general staff having to decide which plan to use and where to send which troops.¹²³

General Hellebaut saw the main tasks of coverage as repulsing small-scale enemy raids, which could take place even before a declaration of war, or, in the case of a

¹²² Crahay, p. 249; "Notre Securite./Considerations et Propositions du Lieutenant-General Hellebaut", to Monsieur le Président de la Commission mixte chargée d'étudier l'état actuel de l'Armée ainsi que les necessities de la defense effective du territoire (Arrêté Royal du 25 mars 1936) à *Bruxelles.*, in MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), *sous-farde* "suggestions."

¹²³ Hellebaut, pp. 30-4.

surprise attack by “one or more motorized divisions,” to buy time for reinforcements to arrive by causing the enemy to have to deploy and fight (rather than just advance in column). As opposed to General De Grox, General Hellebaut asserted that Belgium would have at least a few hours warning and preparation time before an enemy invasion in force. For this, he emphasized, “*It is important that a good information service guarantees that at any price* [emphasis in the original].” Like General De Grox, General Hellebaut saw only one potential aggressor, asserting that the invasion could come from the east (Germany) or from the north (Germany by way of the Netherlands), with his continuous front extending from Arlon in the Ardennes to Antwerp.¹²⁴

His recommendations for coverage included two or three lines of demolitions or obstacles defended by fire along the frontier, so that even if the enemy carries one line it would be hung up on the next. The demolitions would be defended by platoons, under an officer, with a machine-gun section and an anti-tank gun. Behind these lines would be larger mobile groups capable of rapidly “reinforc[ing] or supplement[ing] coverage.” Behind these groups would be the main position of resistance, whose rapidly and first-arriving mobilized forces would function as outposts for that position and at the same time, a second line for the coverage while the other, later arriving, troops manned the main position.¹²⁵

General Hellebaut recognized that the coverage groups to defend the destructions and obstructions could not be constituted by regular troops, based in too-distant garrisons, without suicidally weakening the forces available for the main position. As well, peacetime active units represented at most one third of their war-time strength (the rest formed

¹²⁴ Hellebaut, pp. 34-35.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

by mobilized reservists), so these units would be too small to do the job. Finally, it would take longer to mobilize sufficient covering forces from active units than it would take for an enemy to launch a sudden attack. Special (i.e. elite) units formed of 18-month servicemen would not work because their formation “appears to us a solution scarcely conforming to Belgian psychology.” They would also cause practical problems and be too expensive. He advocated the formation of local militias from soldiers “*chosen for this mission in all arms and who would have completed a first recall at least* [emphasis in the original].” These soldiers, aged between twenty-two and thirty-five, under military discipline and regularly drilled, “defending, moreover, their own village and their property, would show at least as much tenacity as young recruits of twenty originally from other regions of the country. One could, besides, stimulate the *amour-propre* of the local militias by honoring them, notably during holidays and patriotic ceremonies, in the presence of their fellow citizens, of whom they would be the safeguard.” These militias would be joined by local *Gendarmes*, border-guards, and military foresters.¹²⁶

The mobile forces forming the second level of General Hellebaut’s coverage scheme would be constituted from motorized units (such as were being formed from the Belgian Cavalry Corps) who belonged *behind* the front line rather than *on* the front line. If these units were garrisoned in suitably-located areas, they could both provide coverage and defend Brussels or other large cities by responding rapidly to the threatened area of coverage.¹²⁷

General Hellebaut’s scheme for eighteen divisions with twelve-months under the colors would provide either six or twelve full battalions of fully-trained troops, depending

¹²⁶ Ibid., pp. 37-8.

¹²⁷ Ibid., pp. 39-40.

on the time of year. The recall of a single class of reservists, “in case of political tension or of danger signaled by the information service,” would boost that number to twenty-four or thirty battalions, fully trained and having participated in maneuvers, ready at a moment’s notice to deploy to the main position of resistance to form the second echelon of the coverage and the outposts of the main position.¹²⁸

General Hellebaut argued to the commission that his solution to the problem of coverage was superior to the conception of forming “provisional battalions,” whether of six- or twelve-month recruits, proposed in the newspapers (as well as by Minister Devèze and General Van den Bergen) because having militias permanently in place avoided the continual rotation of units through defensive points. The greatest danger General Hellebaut saw to coverage was a “sudden and rapid” raid, pushing into coverage and mobilization and even, perhaps, breaking into the heart of the country. However, he believed such a raid must, of necessity, be small, not the massive armored invasion that would occur four years later. “The rapidity and the goal pursued by the raids of this type exclude the possibility of multiplying their objectives. They can only have a character of intimidation.” The resulting problem for Belgian mobilization plans was how to “*localize and impede the material and moral effects of such incursions into the interior of the country* [emphasis in the original].” The answer was a “decentralized” mobilization scheme that would “*Spread out the particularly sensitive points* [emphasis in the original].” Belgium had to avoid concentrating the process of mobilization into one area that could be disrupted by a German motorized raid. Forcing the enemy to go after multiple targets in a hostile area would lead, “by energetic measures and by the *sangfroid* of the authorities,” to the defeat of the raid. He emphasized, however, that Belgian

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 40.

defense not allow itself to be distracted by such a raid but rather to defend itself against a massive invasion. He also urged the education of the Belgian populace on the matter so it does not “confound ‘*coverage of the mobilization*’ with ‘*coverage of the country*’, which could engender panics full of consequences in a most critical moment [emphasis in the original].” In other words, he did not want the Belgian people to fear a raid that could break through the frontier defenses, the “coverage of the country,” which fear could complicate the defense of the areas of mobilization and concentration, the “coverage of the mobilization.” In fact, in 1940, crowds of (understandably) terrified Belgian refugees fleeing the Germans greatly complicated the movement of Belgian and Allied troops.¹²⁹

Lieutenant-General Tasnier took up a suggestion by the commission’s president, M. Hubin, that the solution to Belgium’s coverage problem was mines strewn along the frontier, possibly extending all the way from the eastern frontier to the Meuse River; that “one could envisage coverage otherwise than by the prolongation of service time or by the maintenance under the flag of several thousand men having finished their active service. . . . These mines would be commanded from the rear by cemented [positions] which would control their detonation.” These mines would be much larger than current-day land mines, more like the large tunnels filled with high explosives that were used during the Great War (and as far back as Petersburg in the American Civil War in 1864). M. Hubin recalled having heard from Belgian officers that German mines in 1918 had delayed the Allied advance and damaged the morale of the Allied troops. The mines would also be cheap, with 3,000 mines between Arlon and Antwerp, dominated by 1,000 already existing pillboxes manned by 8,000 engineers. Plus, there were few accessible routes through the valleys of the Meuse and Ourthe rivers and these routes were perfectly

¹²⁹ Ibid., pp. 40-1.

suited for being blocked by mines. In any case, Belgium could not hope to copy the Maginot Line; it only had to delay an aggressor for eight to ten days until its allies came to help. “This solution stands under the sign of the technology which, whether the military admit it or not, must henceforth triumph in their domain, as in all others.” It is noteworthy that, although not mentioning Germany by name as the future aggressor in this testimony, M. Hubin, like the others, saw the threat as coming from the area between Arlon and Antwerp, that is, from the German border or from Germany via the Netherlands.¹³⁰

General Tasnier responded by first informing his civilian colleagues that “the military do not find the use of technology repugnant; better, they are avid for the simple reason that since the stone age it has furnished them weapons.” Nevertheless, technology was only one of three factors in successful warmaking; the others being “moral forces” and the “value of command which dominates one and the other.” Regarding the proposed solution, an engineers’ colonel, Van Daele, would address the technical aspect but he (General Tasnier) would simply note that the plan relied on efficient and certain detonations at any time of unprotected mines (vulnerable to sabotage?), that modern all-terrain fighting vehicles could easily skirt the craters, since they were not defended by fire, that to be effective, the mined zone would have to be so wide that its functioning could not be guaranteed, and that the plan’s success depended on the “initiative and responsibility to detonate the mines advisably” of a few hundred very low-ranking soldiers: privates or junior NCOs. Most importantly, the plan avoided the necessity of extending the service time of the draftees. “I ask myself how we can have permanently,

¹³⁰ M. Hubin, quoted in “Lieutenant Général TASNIER,” pp, 2-3 in MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), *sous-farde* “Suggestions.”

and in place, the 8,000 engineers declared ‘sufficient’ to assure the functioning of the command posts of a sole longitudinal series of mines. And I have not found the answer.” He also addressed M. Hubin’s contention that the Belgian Army would have to hold for 8-10 days until effective allied assistance arrived; that the *entire* Belgian Army would form coverage for the friendly armies. He agreed completely but noted that the army would need five or six days to mobilize, concentrate, and be ready to fight and that the Belgian Army’s own coverage would have to buy that five or six days. Mines alone would not gain that five or six days but only a matter of hours.¹³¹

General Tasnier also doubted M. Hubin’s contention that German forces, knowing of the existence of the Belgian mines, would not dare enter such areas. Tasnier cited Belgium’s own miners and quarrymen, who always went into extremely dangerous areas. As well, it does not take less courage to face shells, bombs, and machine guns, “which last and which last [*sic*], while a mine only blows one time.” Besides, the German high command would spot the command posts and some of the mines and would interfere, by saboteurs, smokescreens, and bombing, in their operation, as would the weather.¹³²

The mine solution would have to form part of a larger coverage strategy to “block a [German] motorized irruption as close to the menaced frontier as possible and this, lasting several days.” Belgium was very fortunate to have the river lines and canals in the northeast as well as the fortresses of Liège to block any invasion from the east. General Tasnier discounted any German invasion through the Ardennes because he believed (wrongly, as it turned out) that it would be stopped by the Meuse River and would then be vulnerable to a flanking attack by the French. Besides, the German general staff could

¹³¹ “Lieutenant Général TASNIER,” pp. 1-5, in MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), *sous-farde* “Suggestions”;

¹³² *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

not launch an attack threatening all 300km of Belgium's borders with Germany and Holland. "It will have to choose; the most favorable frontier is that of the north-east of our country." Earlier, he had asserted that the Belgian Army must concentrate on the most dangerous directions, "which are, without contest, those of the east and of the north-east."¹³³

General Tasnier identified the most dangerous sector for the fate of the Belgian Army as the thirty kilometers between Turnhout and Réthy, the latter of which, if broken through, would allow the Germans access to Brussels. Small detachments could penetrate elsewhere but they would be insignificant. Belgians must be prepared to use demolitions to block the most vulnerable routes into the interior of the country and reinforce them as much as possible. That defense would benefit from the money that M. Hubin proposed to spend on mines, 9/10 of which would not be used and could not be moved. Demolitions would only be the "prelude" to the battle for coverage and for the delay necessary to mobilize, concentrate, and have the Allies arrive. The destructions must be guarded to make sure they worked and also because the guard units, once that was done, would become the outposts of the coverage, whose fire would maximize the delays caused by the destructions and make the job of the rest of the army easier once it was constituted. In fact, in May 1940, small Belgian *Chasseurs ardennais* units which did not receive the order to retreat and defended their destructions by fire imposed significant delays (several hours) on the German forces at Martelange, Bodange and Chabrehez. Earlier, General Tasnier had noted the importance of extending service time. Now, implying that coverage required well-trained troops, he "asks [the commission] to have this vision present when

¹³³ "Lieutenant Général TASNIER," pp. 1, 6-7, in MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), *sous-farde* "Suggestions".

we reach the debate on the fixation of the time of service in the issue of which our responsibility will be engaged.”¹³⁴

General Tasnier asserted that coverage battles of necessity were “maneuver combats” because the enemy would have to focus his combat power on a narrow front to achieve a breakthrough the only counter to which was meeting the enemy force with friendly force in a “victorious riposte” by rapidly identifying and countering the main enemy thrust. This called for “fixed resistance. . . and mobile reserves.”¹³⁵

Former chief of staff, and one of the most important Belgian interwar military thinkers, Lieutenant-General Galet testified on Tuesday, June 9. General Galet was not happy to be there and made no secret of the fact:

First, I did not believe I had to be heard by the Mixed Commission; thus your summons came as a surprise to me. . . . In the second place, I scarcely desired to intervene because my public interventions to the Mixed Commission of 1928 and before the liberal left of the Chamber and the Senate, in 1931, have caused me some disillusion. You are aware that the press which supported the minister of national defense and even the French press. . . represented me as being the promoter of a system which pretended to defend the country in not defending it; some gunshots on the Meuse, a rapid retreat to the Scheldt, followed by another on the Yser. In brief, a veritable flight. This same press comes to retake its campaign, on the same theme.¹³⁶

That vented, he reminded the commission of his testimony before its 1928 predecessor. He had warned of the dangers of “a sudden irruption of a motorized, partially armored force. . . including tanks, armored cars, infantry on buses, [and] including bombing.” The advantages of such an invasion for the Germans were that it kept the war as far from German industry as possible while seizing Belgian industry and

¹³⁴ “Lieutenant Général TASNIER,” pp. 7-8. Vangansbeke, pp. 10-11.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹³⁶ Commission Mixte, Sixième séance. Mardi 9 Juin (Matin), p. 44, in MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), *sous-farde* “Documents relatifs à l’élaboration des Cffes.R.”

disrupting Belgian mobilization and concentration. The covering forces responsible for parrying or delaying this invasion were made up of frontier garrisons who, as other generals also testified, were responsible for protecting the mobilization and concentration of the army.¹³⁷

The problem at the time was that because of the ten-month length of service¹³⁸ Belgium only had mobilisable garrisons during the summer; at other times of the year Belgium was essentially wide open. Things were not that much better in 1936. The former situation could be justified by the climate of the time: there was much clamor in the Parliament for six-month service and so ten months was a victory. Also, they were living in the time of Locarno, when “everybody was at peace” and Germany only had ten divisions, none of which were in the Rhineland.¹³⁹

The main factors differentiating 1936 from 1928 were: “*German rearmament* [emphasis in the original],” which would increase the numerical strength of the *Wehrmacht* to the extent that now the Belgians had to worry about the German right flank extending as far as Antwerp, a possibility unthinkable in 1928 with the 100,000-man *Reichswehr*; “*the intensive motorization, the constitution of great motorized units* [emphasis in the original],” giving surprise attacks more punch and requiring the augmentation of Belgian frontier posts; and “*the suppression of the demilitarized zone* [emphasis in the original]” bringing the German army to the Belgian border.¹⁴⁰

General Galet’s solution was to rely on “troops in place, thus, of frontier garrisons.” He argued against deploying them “*en cordon*,” thus, dispersing their power.

¹³⁷ Commission Mixte, Sixième séance. pp. 44-45.

¹³⁸ This was changed to eight months after the 1928 Mixed Commission. CDHFA, p. 36.

¹³⁹ Commission Mixte, Sixième séance, p. 46.

¹⁴⁰ Commission Mixte, Sixième séance. pp. 46-47.

He recommended creating strong and mobile detachments capable of holding their positions and counter-attacking into the flanks of an enemy advance seeking to bypass them. These detachments would gain much of their strength by being supported by fortifications, which “constitute thus, with their garrisons, the framework of the line of protection.” He took the opportunity to condemn the poor state of the Antwerp forts compared with the Namur and Liège forts which were being modernized and improved.¹⁴¹

General Galet, like the other generals, saw the most vital sector of the Belgian defense as the area between Liège and Antwerp. This area was the “probable” German target because a German invasion there would skirt the eastern Belgian fortifications and lead straight into the heart of the country. He declared that the 80 km between the Antwerp and Liège fortresses was too long to spread troops out from garrisons in those cities. He proposed to keep an active division in permanence at the training camp of Beverloo to cut the length of the interval in half. Because the Belgian Army had a strength of six active divisions and a Cavalry Corps, thus, effectively seven divisions, each division would only spend about seven weeks in the Beverloo camp where they would also be completing their training. He saw no problems with having troops in training in the winter because long nights were favorable for instruction and it didn’t get too cold anyway; they would just need to add central heating to the barracks. General Galet envisioned a fifteen-km long, well-chosen alert position, strengthened by reliance on the area’s canals and reinforced with fieldworks, for the Beverloo division “to hold at all costs.” Thus, the most likely sector for a German irruption would be defended by *three* divisions—at Antwerp, Beverloo, and Liège—performing coverage as opposed to

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 47.

the two divisions currently watching the sector (the other four active divisions being deployed along the Albert Canal (between Antwerp and Liège; this canal was built both for the facilitation of water-borne commerce and for defense). The cavalry regiments at Brasschaet and Beverloo and the First Lancers in Liège would constitute the mobile forces capable of counter-attacking the flank of a German thrust. There would also be a strong mobile force in Brussels to throw itself in front of an enemy raid. General Galet's coverage plans, like those of the other generals, also counted on destructions, this time in the areas between the divisions.

This disposition seems to me *theoretically* efficacious: impossibility of the enemy passing in the 40-kilometer intervals without having previously eliminated one of these posts because of the menace which weighs on their flanks; sufficient force in each of these posts to resist the forces which attack them; permanent coverage thus assured, if the fortresses possessed trained troops at all times.¹⁴²

However, General Galet identified several key issues that would need to be resolved for his scheme to work: the Antwerp fortresses needed to be rebuilt as the Liège fortresses were and the regiments filling the defenses would need to be *real regiments*. Defining an “active” division as one with “at least one trained class under the colors,” General Galet noted that with service of only one year, Belgium's “active” divisions were only comparable to German or French “active” divisions for six months out of the year; “in other words, our six divisions called active correspond to the active and first reserve divisions of great countries.” The Belgian 7th-12th divisions, called “first reserve” divisions, were in effect only comparable to third and fourth reserve divisions of the great powers. Moreover, limited Belgian manpower meant that in order to field six “active” divisions, each division would consist of only 7,300 soldiers per division, as compared to

¹⁴² Ibid., pp. 47-8.

France's twenty active divisions of 12,000 *poilus* and Germany's thirty-six divisions of 13,000 *Landsers*. And in one of Minister Devèze's actions that had triggered the greatest resistance from chief of staff Lieutenant-General Nuyten (who left in 1934), a disciple of Galet's, many special units, like the Frontier Cyclists and the *Chasseurs ardennais* were being created, reducing the number of men per unit. Although General Galet was imperfectly informed on events in the army and did not have the exact numbers of troops and establishments, "I have kept the bad habit of counting the men of companies which go onto exercises. And I am terrified to see that there are only forty men per company. The infantry regiments would thus have only 700 soldiers. But this is no longer a regiment; it is a half-regiment." The expansion of units also meant that officers and NCOs must have been spread very thin; "I am not exactly informed, but I am not without apprehensions in this regard." He warned against a return to the pre-1914 situation, where Belgium had many units which existed essentially on paper, like the fortress battalions "which served only to procure the enemy tens of thousands of prisoners. And this is in the middle of Europe in arms that we delude ourselves thus." Further, General Galet estimated that only the six active divisions were capable of taking the field; the "first reserve" divisions were in practice only suited to garrison fortresses.¹⁴³

General Galet then waded into the debate over "the integral defense of the territory," which he defined as the defense of all areas on the Belgian side of the border.

Here appears a first difference with the formula 'integral defense of the frontier'; the latter entails, I suppose, the protection of the integrality of the localities which happen to be behind the frontier. But the frontier is a line and the battlefield is a zone, even deeper and deeper; consequently, in order to defend integrally the frontier it requires that [coverage] units be behind it.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Ibid., pp. 48-50; Crahay, p. 135.

¹⁴⁴ "Commission Mixte, Sixième séance," p. 51.

Contrary to what General Hellebaut and Minister Devèze proposed, he, Galet, was in favor of the concentration of the army to face the enemy thrust rather than extending the army to cover the length of the Arlon-Antwerp frontier. “In order to defend ‘the integrality of the territory,’ we will defend nothing.” He condemned the *Chasseurs ardennais*, Frontier Cyclists, and other “provincial” units, the creations of “particular interests” (Devèze was an extreme partisan of Wallonia, the Ardennes part of which the *Chasseurs ardennais* were responsible for defending) for dispersing the strength of the army. He asked, presumably acidly, “is it not to be feared, now that Limburg is threatened, that the creation of *chasseurs campinois* will be demanded?” He warned the enemy would appear in force at the place of its choosing and could only be stopped by opposing to it an equivalent force and that battle would decide the fate of all parts of the country, regardless of the provincial units raised to defend them. “In all human affairs, and still more when it is a matter of the health of the country, it is necessary to know to sacrifice for the principal. It is only at this price that the army can be truly reunited and oppose to the principal point the maximum of forces that the country can furnish.” In other words, if frontier areas had to be very lightly defended in order to concentrate the army, the special units in place would have had no real effect on the outcome of the climactic battle, and thus on the fate of their regions, while if they were reunited with the main body of the field army, they could help defeat the invasion, saving the country, including their regions. In any case, Belgium could not afford to fortify effectively the entire frontier region. General Galet dismissed plans for an eighteen-division army because it would involve spreading men and officers too thin and because Belgium simply couldn’t arm all the troops. “In a word, the military state of a façade has been

constituted.” “Here is the second difference with the formula ‘of the integral defense of the frontier’; in that the latter entails a battlefield extending on *all* the frontier [emphasis in the original].”¹⁴⁵

General Galet also rejected the idea of the proponents of the integral defense of the territory that the battle must be waged near the frontier regardless of ratio of friendly and enemy forces. This was one of General Galet’s main ideas: the ratio of forces. He asked the commission a hypothetical question: “*The army finding itself on a good battlefield, chosen as close to the frontier as possible, facing the attack, well reunited, that is to say, occupying a front in rapport with its effectives, to what conduct must it hold?* [emphasis in the original]” For him, as opposed to his opponents, the conduct varied. If the enemy did not overly outnumber the Belgians, in other words, if the Belgians could conceivably stop the aggression, they must fight the main battle in position. If, however, the enemy greatly outnumbered the Belgians, or if allied aid was slow in arriving, and the battle was lost before it was begun, the army must stage a fighting withdrawal, delaying the enemy as much as possible, until the ratio of forces was more favorable. “Here is the third difference with the formula ‘of the integral defense of the territory.’ This latter does not measure the forces; even in this last unfavorable eventuality, it accepts a battle lost in advance, which will play into the enemy’s hands. Not only does it fight on the frontier, on the whole frontier, but it fights against all.” He warned against promising people in the most threatened areas near the frontier that they would be protected; the Belgian Army simply could not do it. He brought the members of the commission back to August 18, 1914, when the Belgian Army effectively reunited and facing the line of the German advance, having fought for fifteen days on the Gette

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 52.

River in front of Brussels, confronted alone two German armies because the Allied aid had not yet arrived. King Albert, then commander-in-chief of the army, totted up the opposing forces: 100,000 for him and 500,000 high-quality troops for the Germans. Despite the advice of that era's partisans of "integral defense of the frontier," Albert concluded that if he fought in place he would give the Germans both the army and the capital while if he withdrew to the fortified place of Antwerp he would give the Germans the capital but save the army. "Does there happen to be anybody today, even among the partisans of the integral defense of the territory, [who would] attack the decision taken by King Albert on August 18, to withdraw? If not, the formula of integral defense is definitively judged."¹⁴⁶

M. Mundeleer, a commissioner from the Chamber, apparently violating commission procedure, asked General Galet if the latter "feels that it is necessary, at the present time, to augment the time of service for the needs of coverage?" Galet responded by urging two years under the colors as the most productive solution given financial concerns although it was the Parliament that would have to make the final decision and the chief of staff would just have to do the best with what he had. Galet's solution would work with one year's service, "but imperfectly." However, Lieutenant General Van den Bergen, then the chief of staff, objected to Galet's phraseology. The commission had been established to determine what the army needed for an effective defense and General Van den Bergen was there "to establish the best military solution for this problem and to deduce from that the minimum service necessary for that solution to be applicable. I fulfill my responsibility in demanding of the country the sacrifices that I feel indispensable." Only if the Parliament did not give him what he needed would he have to

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 52-3; Wanty I:142.

do the best with what he had. What service time would General Galet need to implement his three-division coverage scheme? One year, and he, General Galet, “had had to content himself with less when [he] was chief of staff.” However, the army would be dependent on the government starting mobilization in time. General Van den Bergen emphasized that point to the commissioners—that it was up to the government, in cases of international tension, to recall a class of trained reservists in enough time to man the coverage of General Galet’s scheme. “I am anxious to emphasize that reserve. It is important.”¹⁴⁷

General Galet’s successor as chief of staff, Lieutenant General Nuyten, also testified before the commission. He condemned the triumph of the idea of the “integral defense of the territory” and declared that he had resisted it as much as possible “while remaining in the limits of my prerogatives and of my responsibilities.” He informed the Commission that King Albert, by refusing repeated French insistences that he risk his army in ill-conceived offensives, had preserved the army. In a 1918 document distributed to the ministries and the army, he had consecrated the strategy of the ratio of forces, onto which General Galet had faithfully held. The doctrine had held until three years previously and had “served as the base of all the works of the general staff; the education at the *École Militaire*, and at the *Ecole de Guerre* was impregnated with it.”

Unfortunately, the debate was not a “*school discussion* [emphasis in the original],” but had sunk hundreds of millions of francs into permanent fortifications along the frontier. General Nuyten added that recent developments in Germany had not invalidated the concept of the ratio of forces. He complained that the supporters of “the integral defense of the territory” would not settle for defending *as much as possible* of the country, which

¹⁴⁷ “Commission Mixte, Sixième séance,” pp. 54-55.

was possible, but promised to protect *the entirety* of the country, regardless of enemy strength, which was not.

Good sense indicates that no human enterprise can be led to a good end without taking into account the reactions that its realization inevitably provokes. In the military domain, this observation expresses itself by the fact that one can decide on the use of one's own forces only in consideration of the means of which the adversary disposes; in other terms, it is necessary, in war, to operate in function of "*the ratio of forces*" present.

Of this introductory principle that any relatively informed military leader considers the foundation of his profession, the new doctrine makes a *tabula rasa*. Its partisans pretend to *substitute their will for the possibilities of war* and appear persuaded that, by virtue of certain defensive organizations, a country of *8 million* peaceable inhabitants can, in all hypotheses, victoriously resist at the frontier the measures of force of an essentially military people and counting *67 million* inhabitants [emphases in the original]

He reminded the commission that in 1914 the Anglo-French forces coming to their aid were driven back and the Belgian Army was saved by being able to withdraw to the Fortified Position of Antwerp.¹⁴⁸

He summarized the plan for "integral defense of the territory" as based entirely on the assumptions that the invader will be German (although, in his testimony, he seems to share this hypothesis); that defenses must be oriented towards the east; that no invasion will be tolerated and for that reason the defenses must be as close to the frontier as possible; that if the enemy invades north of the river Vesdre (i.e. between Verviers and Antwerp), the decisive battle will be fought there despite the lack of any foreign military aid; and that if the enemy invades to the south of the Vesdre, the battle will be fought with guaranteed French aid. "As to those who don't bow before this pretention, they are

¹⁴⁸ Lt. G. Nuyten before the Mixed Commission, #58-62, in MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), *sous-farde* "Documents relatifs à l'elaboration des Cffes. R."

accused of wanting voluntarily to abandon a great part of the territory. They are traitors to the country.”¹⁴⁹

He pointed out that no Belgian general had ever proposed deliberately abandoning the frontier region, or, indeed, any region that could be protected. The problem with the supporters of the “integral defense of the territory” was that they went beyond this reasonable proposal to insist on no retreat and on the necessity of delivering the decisive battle despite the imbalance in forces, substituting “will” for force. They believed that the spending of hundreds of millions of francs on 300km’s worth of frontier fortifications “is susceptible to compensate for the crushing superiority of the German effectives and material. I do not hesitate to say that this thesis contains the seed of a national disaster.” He shared General Galet’s belief in the necessity of uniting the army along the main axis of the enemy advance “while covering as best as possible the major part of the country, is the most hindering for the enemy.” He, like the other generals, identified the eastern and north-eastern regions as the most threatening in the assumption of a German invasion. He condemned the “weakening of the main part of our forces” by taking troops away to defend secondary sectors like the Ardennes. He who had condemned the creation of the *Chasseurs ardennais* as chief of staff now singled them out as a division, 15% of the infantry effectives, lost to the defense of the country because they would be cut off in the south-east of the territory, far from the decisive battle (he thought). He wished the money spent creating them and the Frontier Cyclist units had been spent on more productive things. He invited the commissioners to compare Belgium with the Netherlands. “Do you see our northern neighbors carry important forces to the eccentric direction of Dutch Limburg, to the detriment of the direct defense of the heart of the Netherlands? . . . From

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., #62.

the fact that we have an attackable frontier of 300 kilometers. . . we must resolve to preserve the essential, even if it means sacrificing the accessory.”¹⁵⁰

He complained that the proponents of “the integral defense of the territory” wanted to “disperse” troops while they should be concentrated, wanted troops in a “cordon” while they should be deployed in depth, called for troops to be “immobile” rather than maneuverable. He predicted that a defensive line organized by the integralists would be “pierce[d], envelope[d], and roll[ed] up. In fact, the integral defense of the territory equals the negation of the conduct of arms and, under the fallacious pretext of sheltering even the last frontier village from an invasion, it compromises the safeguard of our national integrity.”¹⁵¹

General Nuyten also condemned the belief (shared by many of the generals) that the German main drive would go through Belgian Luxembourg. He argued that an invasion passing by way of Dutch Limburg and Dutch Brabant was “*the most dangerous direction of attack.*” This invasion would turn, and thus render “absolutely useless,” all the fortifications erected along Belgium’s eastern frontier between Arlon and Aachen in Germany. The Germans would only have to worry about the decrepit fortresses of Antwerp and the fledgling Ghent bridgehead; 578 million francs of the 600 millions spent on defensive works by Minister Devèze would thus have been wasted (the rest having gone to projects that would actually help the field army); “is this the goal of a rational defensive organization?” He condemned Minister Devèze’s cherished fortifications on the Herve plateau and urged an army concentration in depth in the north-east of the country; the only forces not concentrated would be the garrisons of the Liège, Namur,

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., #62-64.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., #65.

and Antwerp fortified positions. However, if the Germans were known to be respecting Dutch neutrality, the army could concentrate east of Liège because its left flank would be covered by neutral Dutch Limburg.¹⁵²

As for coverage, General Nuyten recommended going back to the pre-“integral defense of the territory” plan in which units would remain “reunited” in their garrisons to defend their neighborhoods. This was the best way to handle a surprise enemy attack because the existence of the nodes of resistance would force the aggressor to limit the depth of his advance and would protect the vital sectors of the country. If the enemy advanced past these nodes, the nodes could counterattack into the aggressor’s flank and cut off the main body of his troops. The “integralists” (to coin a phrase) were, on the contrary, dispersing the covering forces along the frontier to the extent that they were far too spread out to stop an attack “by modern military formations regularly constituted.” He noted that there were already complaints about the pillboxes being erected along the eastern frontier to protect these covering troops: “they are only in the product stage and already conscientious and experienced officers have declared to me that they will never close their men there in case of hostilities.” These pillboxes were also known by the enemy, who could easily plan the reduction of these vulnerable shelters. “The enemy can, with impunity, push assault tanks up to the embrasures of the shelters to blind their fire, after which grenades or flamethrowers would reduce the defenders without encountering any opposition.”¹⁵³

General Nuyten offered several contingencies for coverage. In case of a surprise motorized invasion, he, like General Galet, recommended keeping a trained division at

¹⁵² Ibid., pp. 67-8.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 69.

Beverloo in permanence to help manage the long stretch between Antwerp and Liège and holding a small number of defensive nodes garrisoned by trained troops: the fortified positions of Antwerp, Namur, and Liège. The best way to deal with a raid would be to send the active army to hold “Brussels, Antwerp, Beverloo, Liège, Namur, Mons, and Ghent.” The enemy force would exhaust itself in trying to take the positions and would not dare to bypass them, thus offering its flanks to counterattacks by motorized Belgian formations, including the cavalry regiments. However, General Nuyten did not believe the enemy attack would come without warning and the diplomats would have to warn the army in advance of the signs and the government would have to take appropriate action.¹⁵⁴

General Nuyten argued that it would be impossible for any covering force deployed on 300km of border to stop an enemy motorized invasion; even based on a water obstacle like a junction canal with its bridges blown, the covering forces would only delay the aggressor (who would have pioneers and water-crossing technology) for a few hours. He warned against copying the French; Belgium could not, in money or trained troops for a garrison, afford a Maginot Line. Belgium also could not hope to gain air superiority. He closed by noting that Belgium would suffer greatly “whoever are our allies or our enemies” and that consequently, “before thinking of the best fashion of defending the country, let’s think first of the best fashion of not having to defend it.”¹⁵⁵

Another former chief of staff, Lieutenant General Maglinse, called for an increase in service time to eighteen months, to give “to the draftees a stamp such that the reserve divisions as well as the active divisions will have a certain combative value and [such]

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., #73-4.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., #71, 74.

that they will be able to accomplish their mission successfully. Do not forget that this mission will be essentially defensive.” He also praised Minister Devèze’s improvement of regular officer training and called for it to continue. He urged the doubling of the cadres of the active regiments, especially in the higher ranks. “In each active regiment there must be a lieutenant colonel and one or two battalion commanders who would take command of the reserve regiments upon mobilization.”¹⁵⁶

It is noteworthy that all the Belgian generals who testified before the commission correctly expected the invasion to come from Germany and to be led with mechanized or motorized units backed by powerful air units, especially bombers. They were less perspicacious in expecting the main German thrust to drive through Belgium’s eastern and northeastern frontiers as the Germans had done in the Great War. At most, the Germans would expand their flank to drive through the Netherlands as well, something they had chosen not to do in 1914. In 1936 the Belgians did not expect an invasion through the Ardennes. Nor did the Belgians expect to have to fight the French. Rather, they expected the French to come to their aid, again as had happened in 1914. Whatever passions animated civilian political discourse, the generals did not see the French as a threat. One of the two Flemish members of the commission, M. Marck, returning to an earlier question, raised this point in asking General Galet if he felt Belgium’s defenses should be oriented in a single direction (against Germany) or more “general.” “Certain people feel that the danger menaces [us] from the east side, while others are of the opinion that our defense must be organized on all our frontiers in order that it fits in with our foreign policy. I will not hide from you that I envisage above all the question of the

¹⁵⁶ “Audition du Général Maglinse,” p. 6, in MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), *sous-farde* “Documents relative à l’elaboration des Cffes.R”.

Franco-Belgian military accord.” In response, General Galet requested time to reflect before giving his answer. On August 4, he sent the president of the Commission a letter in which he declared “The true responsibilities for the fortification plan at this moment in the course of realization, and which is the translation of a unilateral foreign policy that I have always reproved as harmful to the national interest, are necessarily found above all among the small Parliamentary group directed by M. Devèze.” He complained that this cabal had achieved power because its agreement was necessary to keeping a “weak” Catholic-Liberal coalition in power. Now that there was a strong tripartite government including the Socialists, there was no further need to placate the people around Devèze. *“The whole explanation of the vicissitudes of the fortification plan of the country and even of the whole military question in the course of the last five years finds itself in these observations on the grouping of political forces [my emphasis].”* He also rejected Devèze’s assertion that he had proposed this plan of fortifications. In fact, he had called in 1931 for 700 million francs with 280 millions to go to the eastern frontier, 290 millions to go to Antwerp, and 130 millions to go to Ghent, whereas Devèze called for 660 millions, almost all of which to go to the eastern frontier and nothing to go to Antwerp or Ghent.¹⁵⁷

The generals were also unanimous in urging extending the time of service rather than keeping soldiers with the colors longer than promised. To highlight this measure’s importance, Major Paris reported to his ambassador on July 24, 1936, that there had been three incidents of “grumbling” in Belgian units, including in the cyclist battalion in Tervuren.

¹⁵⁷ “Commission Mixte, Sixième séance,” p. 53; Galet to Hubin, August 4, 1936, pp. 1-3, in MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), *sous-farde* “Documents relative à l’elaboration des Cffes.R”.

The [Belgian] General Staff affirm that these incidents had no mutinous character and were quickly and easily suppressed by the regimental officers. The Staff did admit that the emergency measure of retaining certain troops with the colours is a cause of grievance which is almost legitimate and which has proved a good opportunity to the Communists for fomenting discontent. They say that, though the military service is not popular with Belgians, it is carried out with good heart provided that it bears equally on all classes and parties. *Once the Mixed Parliamentary Commission has pronounced on the new measures to be taken to increase the length of military service and this has passed into law, it is not considered that any further trouble will occur in the army* [my emphasis].¹⁵⁸

The Commission closed its proceedings on September 8, 1936. It recommended giving coverage first priority in spending, increasing the time of service to eighteen months for the infantry (except machinegunners) and twelve months for the other arms, and creating units staffed by volunteers to protect the frontiers. Certain military establishments were to be moved to “a geographically well-situated zone.” The fortified position of Antwerp was to be modernized and the Liège and Namur positions were to be finished. The Albert Canal was to be completed as soon as possible and integrated into the defensive system. It was, in fact, to be the main line of defense until 1940 when concerns about the arrival of Allied troops caused this line to be established more towards the middle of the country. The Commission called for a defensive disposition that was not aimed at any one country. This was necessary to keep the country out of war and to keep the peace between Flemings and Walloons, as was the achievement of true linguistic equality in the military. As the parliament could not agree on drafting a law based on the Commission’s recommendations, a new “Committee of National Security” was formed by Ministers De Schrijver, DeMan, and (by now former minister) Devèze. The Committee responded to increasing German militarization by calling for the extreme

¹⁵⁸ D.K. Paris to Sir Esmond Overy, Brussels, July 24, 1936, p. 3, in MRA-AMB 80/3/XIII, #142.

“reinforcement” recommended by the Commission. With the King behind it, the military bill finally passed in December, 1936.¹⁵⁹

C. The May Elections

The world, and even Belgium, did not stop while the Commission was meeting. The results of the May 24, 1936, general election threw the Belgian political world into turmoil and alarmed the three traditional parties. German rearmament, the successful Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the failure of Anglo-French sanctions to protect the Ethiopians, and the “Brown” and “Red” perils (Nazism and Communism) led to a political mood where the new fascist Rexist Party of Lèon Degrelle¹⁶⁰ could take 21 seats in the 202-seat Chamber with 15.26% of Walloon votes, 18.50% of Bruxellois votes, and 7.01% of Flemish votes, mainly drawn from the Catholic Party. In Flanders, the extremist Flemish nationalist parties, especially the *Vlaams Nationaal Verbond*, did quite well, with the VNV winning sixteen seats. A Flemish Catholic priest attributed the Flemish successes to their “exploitation [of] the [rumored] ‘Franco-Soviet’ alliance by saying: the text of the Franco-Belgian military accord has never been published, some secret engagements are hidden from us; perhaps we would be obliged one day to go to the aid of the Soviets, to march with France. . . [and] the progressive augmentation of military charges,” which worried the many Flemish who opposed defense spending because they felt military policy was dictated by anti-Flemish interests. On the other side of the aisle, the Communists also did surprisingly well, tripling their representation to nine seats, mainly at the expense of the POB, the Belgian Socialists. In Belgium, seats in the

¹⁵⁹ Crahay, pp. 176-7

¹⁶⁰ Degrelle was born in 1904 and was a journalist by trade. He started in “Catholic Action” and became director of the Catholic Action’s publishing house, “Christus Rex.” He took this last name as the title of his party. Rex left the Catholic Action in 1935. Degrelle raised a Walloon Legion for the SS during World War II and afterwards lived out the rest of his life in comfortable exile in Spain. He died in 1994.

Chamber are distributed according to a party's share of the popular vote and the leader of the party with the most votes is traditionally invited to try to put together a coalition that commands a majority of seats. In this case, the Socialists, despite having lost three seats, came in at number one with seventy seats, trailed by the Catholics, who had lost sixteen of their previous seventy-six mandates, and the Liberals, who lost one seat and ended up with twenty-two. In the scramble for the spoils of government the parties revealed their thoughts about the defense of the realm.¹⁶¹

On May 27, therefore, after being turned down by the resigning prime minister, King Lèopold summoned Émile Vandervelde, the head of the Socialists, to discuss the formation of a new government. Vandervelde was instructed to investigate the possibility of forming a new government of national union consisting of all three major parties and led by the Socialists (especially by himself). He later reported to the General Council of his party that, among other things, he and the king had discussed the portfolio of Minister of National Defense. "I had the very clear impression that at the Palace, in the case of the prime minister, and in the Flemish and Socialist parliamentary groups, that they are fed up with M. Devèze and that the fact that he would not enter into the government would be welcomed with nearly unanimous satisfaction." Vandervelde suspected that even many Liberals felt the same way. In fact, Vandervelde "would prefer a general, who will act professionally, to a politician leading an action for electoral aims." M. Devèze shortly thereafter announced that he would not accept a portfolio. "In view of the importance of the military situation, he wants to preserve his full freedom of speech and action in order to defend the ideas which are dear to him.—This decision is approved." In other words,

¹⁶¹ Vanwelkenhuyzen, *1936*, pp. 8, 11, 11ff.1, 12, 19; Witte *et al.*, pp. 138, 149; Père Rutten quoted in Vanwelkenhuyzen, p. 132.

Devèze wanted to continue to fight for “the integral defense of the territory” and his scheme for provisional battalions.¹⁶²

On May 28, Lèopold met with the Liberal leader Paul-Émile Janson. Janson called for a decision from the Mixed Commission on the issue of “the integral defense of the territory” but noted how much the Commission had left to do. He did not disown Devèze, but suggested he would support having a technician—a general—heading up the Ministry of National Defense. Another prominent Liberal, Marcel-Henri Jaspar later met with the king, who questioned him about defense policy. Jaspar admitted “‘this is not his speciality. But good sense permits certain conclusions. An effective defense at the frontier on [word illegible] [*sic*] supposes a Maginot Line (cost 20 billions), a powerful army (four years service. . .). All this is impossible for a country like ours. Consequently it is up to the General Staff to determine where it can be defended.’ And Leopold III concluded, ‘impression of little sympathy for Devèze.’” On May 29, Lèopold met with Devèze himself to hear his views on forming a new government. Devèze was in favor of having a general as minister of national defense, but the generals he suggested were presumed to support “the integral defense of the territory.” Also on May 29, another leading Liberal and Walloon extremist, Émile Jennissen, declared to the king his faith in the “integral defense of the territory” by the Belgian Army assisted immediately by the French Army, “the best in the world.” Leopold attempted to disabuse him of that notion, pointing out that the Germans were sitting on the Belgian border and would make a *sudden* attack that the Belgians would have to face alone before the French arrived. Another leading Liberal who met with the king, François Bovesse, generally agreed with

¹⁶² Ibid., pp. 35; Vandervelde quoted in Ibid., p. 39; Ibid., p. 89; President of the Chamber, quoted in Ibid., p. 47.

Devèze but admitted that Belgium's defense should not be unilateral, "but it is necessary to take into account the real danger which is to the east."¹⁶³

On June 1 the Socialist leaders met and Vandervelde spoke out in favor of collective security assured in cooperation with Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and any other peace-loving nations, especially the Scandinavian countries which already had strong socialist parties. "He opposed a lifting of olive branches to the noise of boots which echoed in Germany." Another speaker in the traditionally pacifist POB noted the inconsistency between fighting "interior fascism" and using only words against an invasion "that could only come from a fascist country." He supported a strong defense "against any unprovoked aggression. . . . We do not want the exploitation of patriotism. If we are resolute in defending our country, it is to defend our liberties, our democracy of which we have need in order to build socialism and that it is for no other motive." He condemned the current military organization, expressed high hopes for the Mixed Commission, and demanded the complete makeover of the defense system. Leading Belgian historian of the interwar period Jean Vanwelkenhuyzen observed, "*All the same, the dead weight of the Socialists in matters military delayed for a full year the rearmament of Belgium while the ascent in military power of the IIIrd Reich was flagrant* [my emphasis]." In the end, the "Directives" of the party congress declared, in its section on the "Organization of Peace":

1 Military defense perfected in its technology and limiting to the minimum the military charges.

2 Public monopoly on war materials and nationalization of enterprises specialized in their production.

¹⁶³ Ibid., pp. 51-2. The technician serving as prime minister had done very well in getting Belgium out of the worst of the Depression and was almost universally popular. Capelle Papers, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 54-5; *ibid.*, pp. 67, 81-2; Bovesse, quoted in Capelle papers quoted in *ibid.*, p. 84.

3 Active participation in any international effort tending to organize peace by the preventive elimination of economic causes of war, the reinforcement of collective security, the revision of the unjust clauses of the [Paris] peace treaties, the rapprochement of peoples, and progressive, simultaneous, and controlled disarmament.

The Socialists also opposed military accords or prolonging the time of military service.¹⁶⁴

The right of the Catholic party warned against a Socialist-led government that “would abuse its powers” in the name of defending the country against a non-existent fascist threat, declaring as part of government policy the defense of “democratic institutions.” Above all, Belgian foreign policy must not follow in the wake of the Franco-Soviet pact! Meanwhile, the Flemish Catholics were trying to stop the hemorrhaging of voters to the Flemish nationalists by playing the “*los van Frankrijk*” (“away from France”) card, in which, serendipitously, they actually believed. The Catholic press organ, *La Libre Belgique*, declared on June 4 that the aim of foreign and defense policy must be to preserve Belgium’s freedom of action and to avoid any entangling alliances (that is, with the France of the leftist Popular Front suspected in Belgium as a Bolshevik agent) that could draw the country into a fight in which the country had no dog (such as for the Soviets).¹⁶⁵

Vandervelde reported on June 6 that he would try to form a government, but opinion around the Palace was that he would not succeed; the other parties distrusted him too much, especially as he was the head of the Second International. In fact, just about everybody hoped for a government with all three parties, but with the sitting prime

¹⁶⁴ Max Buset quoted in *ibid.*, p. 101; *ibid.*, p. 102; “Procès-verbal du Congrès du POB du 1ier juin 1936” quoted in *ibid.*, p. 109; *ibid.*, p. 165.

¹⁶⁵ *La Libre Belgique*, June 4, 1936, quoted in Vanwelkenhuyzen, 1936, pp 140, 135.

minister, Paul van Zeeland, who had gotten Belgium out of the worst of the depression but had refused the king's initial offer to form the new cabinet, at its head.¹⁶⁶

On Sunday, June 7, provincial elections brought more bad news to the three major parties. The Catholics kept their plurality in the provincial councils with 224 seats, but had lost 94; the Socialists came in second with 221 but had lost 20; and the Liberals went from 95 to 89 seats. Again, the big winners were the Rexists (up 78 seats to a total of 78), the Flemish nationalists (a gain of 19, bringing them to 50), and the Communists (from 7 to 27). The results, added to a growing and threatening general strike, pointed out the necessity of putting an end to the governmental crisis, especially because it appeared the new French Popular Front under Léon Blum was grappling with a strike by one million workers, while the leftist government in Spain was also faced with near anarchy.¹⁶⁷ On June 8, Vandervelde saw the king and admitted that, after having met with Liberal and Catholic leaders, he could not form a tripartite government and advised Leopold to try van Zeeland again, which was done. After a day's consideration, van Zeeland agreed to form a government. In distributing the portfolios, van Zeeland gave nothing to Devèze; the Ministry of National Defense went to a technician, Lieutenant General Henri Denis. The absence of Devèze certainly pleased the king (and would have pleased the king's father, the late king Albert). It also gratified the Socialists, the Flemish Christian Democrats (one of the members of the Catholic coalition), and the Flemish nationalists, all of whom loathed the man. He had not been removed before because he was very powerful in the Liberal left and the Liberal ministers had threatened to resign *en bloc*, bringing down the government, if he were. The 1936 elections had brought the Rexists

¹⁶⁶Kieft, p. 99, Vanwelkenhuyzen, 1936, pp. 15-16, 162-5.

¹⁶⁷ Vanwelkenhuyzen, 1936, p. 167.

into the large group of Devèze's opponents, but, argues Jean Vanwelkenhuyzen, the changed military situation was the main reason for Devèze's fall. With the remilitarization of the Rhineland, the "integral defense of the territory" could no longer work because the delay required to alert the troops no longer existed; the German armored divisions were right across the border and they would get to Belgium before French aid could arrive. The French had made very clear in the May staff talks that they could not support the Belgians on the frontier but, at best, on the Meuse. Rather than accept the death of his dream, Devèze preferred to resign. After his decision was made public, he declared:

My place is today in the Chamber and no longer in the government.—The Minister of National Defense, in effect, must refrain from any political intervention beyond that which strictly touches the interest of the army. I have done that with an absolute rigor for three and a half years.-- I feel I have to retake all my liberty of speech and of action to assume thusly a task which is not less high nor less beautiful than that with which I am currently charged.—I do not worry about the army because the Liberal party will only collaborate if the national defense is in sure hands and I even feel that, as deputy, knowing the questions as I know them today, I will be in a position to make prevail before the Parliament and before [public] opinion the solutions that command the adaptation of our forces to the new international circumstances as much regarding the time of service as regarding the indispensable military credits.¹⁶⁸

Devèze told his confidant, the French military attaché General Riedinger, that he was resigning to fight certain ideas held by the military circles around the king (already mistrusted by the French)—again, the idea of defense in depth held, among others, by the king and his military advisor, then Colonel van Overstraeten, who would be blamed by the French in 1940 for having been pro-German and having encouraged the king to capitulate. In addition, the Mixed Commission was having difficulties and as a minister, Devèze could not intervene or participate while as a simple deputy he could work for his

¹⁶⁸Ibid., p. 167, 170, 181-182, 193-8; Kieft, pp. 98-9.

cause. Devèze carried out his campaign in the press, especially in the Liberal journals like *L'Indépendance Belge*, *La Gazette*, and *La Gazette de Charleroi*.¹⁶⁹

On June 9, Major Paris reported to his superiors that Devèze had retired because of a change of defense policy—the victory of “defense in depth.” That same day, Sir Noël Charles, the councilor of the British Embassy, reported to the Foreign Secretary that King Leopold’s secretary, Robert Capelle, had condemned Devèze in a private conversation, observing that Devèze’s “vanity had become glaring and that it appeared that he had squandered millions on useless defensive nests in the Ardennes while nothing was done to protect the heart of the country. Capelle complained that “his political base and his *amour-propre* constitute his only preoccupations. Moreover, he lies with a disconcerting facility. He only seeks to be praised and to reunite the most possible electors for his country.” He was not worried about the defense of the nation. Moreover, King Lèopold blamed him for the removal of General Nuyten as chief of staff. Jean Vanwelkenhuyzen observes that “to tell it all, Devèze is, without doubt, for the time, the personage who has the most inspired unkind reflections about politics and politicians.” Certainly, relations between the Ministry of National Defense and the General Staff were much quieter until the fateful year of 1940.¹⁷⁰

The choice of Devèze’s successor came up. The king had hoped General De Grox, then commander of the Ecole de Guerre, would take the job but the latter declined “for reasons of health.” He had been cabinet chief when de Broqueville was Minister of National Defense, had had it with politics, and did not want to repeat the experience. Consideration then centered on Lieutenant-General Henri Denis, an artilleryist by trade, a

¹⁶⁹ Devèze, quoted by Riedinger in Vanwelkenhuyzen, 1936, p. 195; *ibid.*, pp. 195-196.

¹⁷⁰ Major D.K. Paris and Sir Noël Charles, cited in *ibid.*, pp. 196-7; Capelle quoted in *ibid.*, p. 197; Leopold III, cited in *ibid.*

Liberal by inclination, former collaborator with General Galet, he was in charge of III Army Corps around Liège and was intimately familiar with the Herve plateau which was one center of controversy. He did not hide what he thought of “the integral defense of the territory”: it would lead to a disaster and it would be his troops who would suffer the most. He opposed the deployment of major forces on the Herve plateau forward of the old forts of Liège and called for a defense in depth based on the *second* line of defense. Nevertheless, General Denis was clear about wanting to fight the main battle *forward of Liège*, thus reassuring those in Belgian Luxembourg and the rest of Wallonia who feared the replacement of Devèze meant their abandonment to the Germans. Raoul van Overstraeten called Denis “one of the ‘most cultivated and independent’” generals and he had had a distinguished career. He would remain in office through World War II, in Belgium until May 25, 1940, and in the government in exile in London for the rest of the conflict.¹⁷¹

Once the new government was formed and approved by the king, it had to get down to business. Prime Minister van Zeeland declared that in any contentious issue, the government would follow the policy of its predecessor (also headed by van Zeeland).

Regarding

. . . the exterior, it will lead the same policy, inspired by the care to assure to the country, in the most complete independence, but also in the respect of its duties of international collaboration, security and peace. Its attitude in the question of national defense will be inspired by the conclusions which the Mixed Commission reaches. It will assure, by the most efficacious means, the inviolability of the territory and the protection of our liberties.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 242-3; van Overstraeten, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 243.

¹⁷² Paul van Zeeland, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 258.

On June 24, van Zeeland gave the Governmental declaration to the Chamber, setting out his government's program. The next day the deputies began to debate whether or not to vote confidence in the new team. This took several days. On Monday, June 29, the debate touched on national defense. A new Flemish Liberal deputy, Adolphe van Glabekke, declared he would vote against the government. "[T]he military question," he affirmed, 'raises in the Flemish part of the country, a legitimate emotion [. . .] it has not been appeased concerning national defense. Our populations demand...'. Interrupting him, Staf Declercq shouted 'Disarmament!'—'No, he replied with aplomb, completion of defense at the frontier.'" The Flemings, asserted van Glabekke, wanted an effective defense of Wallonia so Flanders would not again become the main battlefield. However, he did not seem to want this if it involved the prolongation of service time—a notion opposed by most Flemings. Another Flemish deputy declared that Flanders wanted absolute neutrality and certainly no alliance with France. In the end, the new government received a greater vote of confidence than that accorded to its predecessor.¹⁷³

D. Independence

The precondition of the Flemish Catholics for joining the new government was that Belgium should practice complete independence free from any obligations that could draw the country into a war between other powers. In fact, there was a vast majority for that idea among the populace. However, there was a current in the POB, especially enounced by Vandervelde, that Belgium should align its foreign policy with that of the French Popular Front government. Not surprisingly, this idea met with strong resistance from the Flemish and the conservatives.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Ibid., pp. 253, 271; Chamber debate, quoted in *ibid.*, p.277-8; Kieft, p. 122.

¹⁷⁴ Kieft, pp. 102-3.

Despite his strong desires, Vandervelde did not become foreign minister. That post was taken by Paul-Henri Spaak, who had previously lobbied the Socialist leaders in favor of Devèze's military reform project, while the other Socialist Young Turk, Henri de Man, wanted Belgium to imitate the Swiss model of local militias. "Thus, by process of elimination, Spaak became his party's leading exponent of a strong army and its leading candidate for Foreign Minister, since military and foreign political questions were so closely connected." Spaak leaned heavily on two Foreign Ministry functionaries, Pierre van Zuylen and Fernand Van Langenhove, who will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter and the former of whom was blamed by the French for all undesirable (from the French perspective) ideas in the Belgian Foreign Ministry. The advice they gave Spaak was the same as they had given to his predecessors. "Spaak had to listen to them carefully not only because of his own inexperience, but also because the demands of domestic policy now paralleled those of foreign policy." The advice was about the need to cement internal consensus by clarifying and limiting Belgium's international commitments. It was also to get out from under Locarno, the obligations of which were no longer supportable by a small country like Belgium.¹⁷⁵

On July 20, Spaak gave his maiden speech before the foreign press and declared "I want the foreign policy of Belgium to be placed firmly under the sign of realism. . . . I want only one thing: a foreign policy which is exclusively and wholly Belgian." He would go on to inform French Foreign Minister Delbos "that Belgian public opinion was undergoing a moral crisis. Flemish extremism was only part of the story. The Belgian middle class distrusted the Popular Front. . . . Belgian opinion was worried about the Franco-Soviet Pact and the risks it might entail for France. If the Belgian government

¹⁷⁵ Kieft, pp. 103-9, 119; Pierre Van Zuylen cited in *ibid.*, p. 105.

was to win acceptance of its military reform project, it had to refuse the role of guarantor in the new Locarno.”¹⁷⁶

On September 9, Premier van Zeeland gave a radio address in which he said essentially the same thing; that the world was splitting up between leftist and rightist extremists (such as the Communists and the Rexists) and that he had to prevent such a split in Belgium. “Belgium’s salvation lay in the consensus represented by the three major parties and in the realization of a political equilibrium. Belgium had to be stronger and more independent than ever. . . . In a word, domestic equilibrium required a position of equilibrium in international affairs.” “Independence” will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter; suffice it here to reemphasize that the needs of Belgian domestic policy influenced Belgian foreign policy which, in turn, greatly affected Belgium’s military policy. *Domestic policy thus required the Belgian planners seriously to prepare plans and defenses against a French invasion that none of them actually expected to occur.*¹⁷⁷

Meanwhile, the Flemish were disappointed with the new government’s nationality program and Federalism was increasingly urged and started getting support not only from the Nationalists but now also from the Flemish Catholics. Historian David Owen Kieft points out how “middle-class Flemings were temporarily willing to overlook the authoritarian tendencies of the Nationalists, especially after the general strike and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.” This trend led to a Flemish congress in which the Catholic Party practically split in October and the Flemish Catholic *Katholieke Vlaamse Volkspartij* started talking with the Nationalists. Meanwhile, Léon Degrelle and his

¹⁷⁶ Paul-Henri Spaak quoted in Kieft., p. 110.

¹⁷⁷ Paul van Zeeland cited in Kieft, pp. 113-4.

Rexists, expecting the growing split in Belgian society would continue and that most Belgians would join him in preference to the Communists, were “agitating” to block the function of the parliament and cause new elections that they would win. However, they could not win with no support in Flanders, a region that had been relatively cold to Degrelle although the Flemish supported his anti-French rhetoric. The Rexists had touted the institution of a “linguistic regime” in place of the existing scheme. They now supported a federal solution. Thus, a marriage of convenience was born between the Rex and the *Vlaams Nationaal Verbond* that would control one fifth of the Chamber. This ended up being a disaster for both parties: Flemish nationalism was anathema to Rex supporters attracted by Degrelle’s “appeals to Belgian patriotism” while Degrelle’s authoritarian tendencies turned off the Flemish Catholics. However, at the time, the government and the major parties did not know the Rexists and the *VNV* had shot themselves (shot each other?) in the foot and feared “that Belgium was on the brink of a major disaster.”¹⁷⁸

At the same time, the defense bill was threatened by the continued opposition of the Flemish Nationalists and Socialists. Spaak was working on the Socialists and the Mixed Commission recognized Flemish antipathy to a Belgian foreign policy tied to France. On October 14, Leopold made a speech consecrating a new policy of “independence” to garner support for the military bill. Unfortunately, his speech failed to define exactly what he meant and the two groups most needed had different interpretations of “independence.” The Socialists felt it included “‘intense action’ on behalf of the League and collective security” while the Flemish saw it as “strict neutrality.” On October 27, the Government presented the military bill to the Parliament.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 122-7.

The next day, Flemish voters dissatisfied with the explanations of the new policy of “independence” indicating that Belgium would still be faithful to collective security and the League of Nations, and fearing that ties to France would continue, allied with the Socialists, who were still against increasing service time, and shot the bill down in a preliminary vote. However, after secret negotiations between van Zeeland and French Premier Blum, the French and the British were convinced to release Belgium from any obligations as a guarantor of a new Locarno Pact. This relieved the minds of the Flemish deputies and others who feared foreign entanglements and the defense bill was voted in. This bill would shape the Belgian military that would defend the realm against the Germans in 1940. Within the Ministry of National Defense, the fact that the same minister of national defense and the same chief of staff remained in office until 1940 as well as the fact that defense in depth had decisively defeated “the integral defense of the territory” would lead to a quiet few years until the Sudeten Crisis would shake up the Belgian mobilization scheme.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ Kieft, pp. 130-1, 145-54.

Chapter 4: The Influence of Foreign Policy on Defense Policy

Interwar Belgian foreign policy was based on a fear of Germany justified by the horrific experience of German occupation during the Great War. Former Belgian Foreign Minister Henri Jaspar summed things up in a speech in Paris in which he sketched the view of “the average Belgian”: “fidelity, strongly tempered with skepticism, *vis-à-vis* the League of Nations, inveterate mistrust of Germany and of its most pacific affirmations, unanimous decision of the population to defend Belgian territory, and horror of any military adventure into which Belgium could be drawn.” Both Belgium’s steadfast dedication to the concept of “collective security” until the Rhineland debacle of 1936 and its equally steadfast dedication to “independence” afterwards were based on an assessment of what would best keep the Germans on their own side of the border. Foreign policy affected defense policy because what were perceived to be the needs of the army depended upon the general European climate and especially how big a threat Germany appeared.¹⁸⁰

After the World War when Germany lay prostrate and partially occupied, the Belgian army was allowed to languish despite the advice of military professionals and even the minister of national defense. When Germany began overtly to rearm and Belgian diplomats began to report increasingly threatening news from the Reich, the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs¹⁸¹ began to rethink the country’s relationship with France, on whom it had counted for protection against the “*Boche*” while at the same time Belgium’s military effort was intensified.

¹⁸⁰ Henri Jaspar, quoted in André de Kerchove [Belgian ambassador in Paris] to Paul van Zeeland [Belgian foreign minister], Paris, April 24, 1936 in AMBAE 11185/1, doc.# 2686.

¹⁸¹ . . . and of Exterior Commerce (to give it its full name; henceforth it will be referred to as the “Ministry of Foreign Affairs”).

The pivotal event was the German remilitarization of the left bank of the Rhine River. This was a part of Germany demilitarized by the Versailles Treaty, on March 7, 1936.¹⁸² The remilitarization was a clear breach of both the Versailles Treaty and the Locarno Pact which recognized the perpetual demilitarization of the Rhineland. It also put the *Wehrmacht*¹⁸³ on Belgium's frontier. The Anglo-French alliance was in no mood or position to force Germany to keep to its freely-signed international agreements. The international system had already been weakened by Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations subsequent to its invasion of Manchuria, by Germany's departure from the League, by the collapse of disarmament talks, and by the failure to enact meaningful sanctions against Italy after its invasion of member state Abyssinia. Belgium determined it would be safer going it alone, avoiding any treaties that could draw it into a war for foreign interests. This policy, called "independence" or "free hands," fully enunciated in Leopold III's speech of October 14, 1936, not strictly corresponding to "neutrality," actually represented the deep desire not only of Leopold but also of his father, the lionized Albert I. It was based on an awareness that the only way for the Kingdom to survive a Western European war was to stay out of it and that entanglement with France would inevitably bring Belgium into the conflict it dreaded. In addition, as we have seen, Belgian public opinion, especially that of the Flemish and the Socialists, was opposed to any military buildup if it could be used for interests not Belgian. From Leopold's speech until the German invasion of May 10, 1940, as the climate in Germany became increasingly belligerent, Belgium resisted nearly constant Anglo-French entreaties for

¹⁸² Ironically, this occurred one day after Belgium had finally gotten out from under an extremely troublesome 1920 military accord with France.

¹⁸³ German armed forces. The *Wehrmacht* was known as the *Reichswehr* under the Weimar Republic and until June 1, 1935. Matthew Cooper, *The German Army 1933-1945: Its Political and Military Failure* (Lanham, MD: Scarborough House, 1978), p. 131.

alliance and feverishly strove to build an army strong enough to dissuade neighbors, especially Germany, from invading.¹⁸⁴

Collective security was embodied in the League of Nations Covenant, especially in Article XVI, which called for members to offer immediate military support to any invaded member, and in the Locarno Pact of 1925, agreed to by Germany, Britain, France, and Italy as well as Belgium, which declared the contemporary borders of Western Europe, including the demilitarization of the Rhineland, inviolable and also required signatories to provide immediate support to the victim of an unprovoked aggression as defined by the Council of the League of Nations. Until the failure of the Locarno regime, Belgian diplomats repeatedly affirmed, at home and abroad, that Belgium's foreign policy was based on these two documents. The interplay between foreign and military policies was summarized at a 1935 meeting between King Leopold's secretary, Robert Capelle, and the vice-president of the Belgian socialist party, Henri de Man, "Belgian military policy has an exclusively defensive character, our foreign policy being based on collective security and on the independence of the country."¹⁸⁵

After the remilitarization of the Rhineland, Belgium successfully had its status altered from being both a guarantor and a guaranteed under Locarno to being only a guaranteed in the new system erected on the rubble of the earlier pact. Belgium, knowing it was in France's and Britain's own interest to protect the Kingdom, successfully

¹⁸⁴ The military side of the issue will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 5. "*Boche*" is a derogatory French term for Germans, equivalent to the American "Kraut," dating from at least World War I. It was also adopted by the British.

¹⁸⁵ Jean Vanwelkenhuyzen, *1936: Leopold III, Degrelle, van Zeeland et les autres* (Brussels: Racine, 2004), p. 31, ff.1; Meeting with Henri de Man 1935(?), Archives of the (Belgian) Royal Palace, Capelle Papers [Henceforth "ARP-Capelle"], XV/11/5, document 8, p. I.

avoided any more international commitments and was “independent” until the Germans crossed its frontier on May 10, 1940.

A. Belgian Foreign Policy to the End of the Great War

As we have seen in chapter 1, Belgium had been a Habsburg possession until its occupation and annexation by French revolutionary armies. Upon Napoleon’s defeat, Belgium was joined to the Netherlands as a buffer against France. Belgium seceded from the Netherlands in 1830. On April 19, 1839, Belgium’s foreign policy and international status was determined by a treaty signed by the Kingdom and by the great powers of Europe: Britain, France, Prussia, Russia, and Austria, all of whom guaranteed Belgium’s perpetual neutrality. This would last until the German invasion on August 4, 1914. On the same day Belgium signed its treaty with the Powers, Belgium signed a peace treaty with the Netherlands that contained the seed of future trouble: Belgium was forced to give up 3/5 of Luxembourg (which became the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg under the Dutch king) and most of Limburg, including the gorgeous medieval city of Maastricht (now Maastricht). These provisions made the job of the Belgian military more difficult because it had to rely on foreign powers (the Netherlands and Luxembourg, both of whom were to prove not up to the task) to protect the approaches to Belgian territory. Belgium was also forced to recognize Dutch control over both sides of the Scheldt estuary leading to Belgium’s major port, Antwerp.¹⁸⁶

Belgian neutrality was tested nine years later when a small group of French revolutionaries tried to overthrow the Belgian monarchy during the Revolution of 1848. Their failure solidified Belgium’s status as an independent state in the eyes of Europeans; Most Europeans, anyway. In 1866, France proposed that it should receive Belgium as

¹⁸⁶ Jane Kathryn Miller, *Belgian Foreign Policy Between Two Wars* (NY: Bookman, 1951), p. 17.

compensation for accepting Prussia's gains at the expense of Austria after Prussia provoked and won the Seven Weeks War. Britain, for whom an independent, neutral Belgium was a strategic necessity (because an enemy controlling the Belgian coast could wreak havoc on British shipping through the English Channel), made both France and Prussia formally promise to respect Belgian neutrality. The link between foreign policy and the military was made more overt in 1878 when Belgian diplomats in Europe were instructed to inform their host governments that the Belgian Government would endeavor to maintain an army strong enough to protect its neutrality. However, the army was only reorganized twenty-one years later, with the support of the Liberal Party, and military service was only made general another four years later still, in 1913.¹⁸⁷

Many Belgians believed that, no matter what happened, the treaties of 1839 would keep their land safe and neutral. Not even the German invasion of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg on August 1, 1914, shook their confidence. They were to get a rude awakening at 7pm on August 2. British Foreign Minister Sir Edward Grey was desperately trying to get both France and Germany, which had inherited Prussia's 1839 guarantee, to promise again to respect Belgian neutrality. However, the Germans gave the Belgians an ultimatum: allow German troops free passage or else! The Belgians had twelve hours to reply. On August 3, the government of King Albert gave a categorical refusal and pleaded for the British assistance that had been so successful in 1866. Germany invaded Belgium on August 4. Thus began the four-year hell described in Chapter One.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Miller, pp. 22-3; Charles Craven Scott cited in *Ibid.*, p. 23; Wanty, I: 1.

¹⁸⁸ Miller, p. 23; Henri Pirenne cited in *Ibid.*, ff. 14; S.L.A. Marshall, , *The American Heritage History of World War I* (NY: Dell, 1967), pp. 59, 60; Miller, p. 26; Witte *et al.* p. 102.

The Belgian government-in-exile in France worked assiduously to gain the support (and money) of its co-belligerents. Legally, Belgium was still neutral, the 1839 treaties stipulating that Belgium did not lose that status even if invaded. Consequently, Belgium did not sign the Pact of London, in which France, Britain, and Russia promised not to enter into separate negotiations. However, the Belgian Army, although under separate command, was integrated into the Allied disposition and did its part on the Western Front while most Belgians felt committed to their allies.¹⁸⁹

On February 18, 1916, the British, French, and Russians jointly declared that “when the time has come, the Belgian government will be invited to participate in the peace negotiations, and that the hostilities will not be ended until Belgium is reestablished in its political and economic independence and is generously indemnified for the damages suffered.” In other words, the Allies recognized Belgium as one of their own although Belgium and the Allies would prove to differ on the definition of “generously indemnified for the damages suffered.” Also in 1916, some Belgian ministers wanted to make an economic treaty with England and France. This was rejected by Albert. He claimed he could not sign such a treaty without consent of Parliament, which was impossible in wartime exile. In fact, Albert was desirous of avoiding any commitments to any foreign powers, friendly or enemy. He also rejected any war aims beyond restoring Belgium in its independence and fulfilling Belgium’s obligations to the nations alongside which it fought. He was thus prepared to consider compromise peace, although not *separate* peace, which would have entailed betraying his co-belligerents and staining Belgian honor. He prevailed upon his government in January 1917 to go against the wishes of the Allies and respond to a peace note sent by American President

¹⁸⁹ Miller, 26; *Le dossier diplomatique de la question belge* quoted in *Ibid.*

Woodrow Wilson in December, 1916. Albert did not prevent his ministers from receiving peace proposals or from attending international conferences, as when Belgian Socialist Camille Huysmans went to the Socialist Congress in Stockholm in the hope of facilitating peace through discussions with German Socialists.¹⁹⁰

B. Belgium and the Peace

After the war ended, the Belgians went into the peace treaty negotiations with high hopes, which were soon to be dashed. Belgium's attitude was not always appreciated by the countries alongside which it fought and its foreign policy was not always conducted in the most effective manner. Noted Belgian historian J. Wullus-Rudiger asserts "political errors were probably committed by Belgium from 1914 to 1918, and certainly in the course of the peace negotiations of 1919-1920. Perhaps not all were avoidable, even with more experience and more diplomatic ability."¹⁹¹

Belgian hopes were economic and territorial. Belgium had been promised "a generous indemnity for the damages suffered." Belgium had been forced to borrow almost one billion dollars from its allies during the war, just over 1/3 to pay for food for occupied Belgium and the rest for military needs. The Belgian government also claimed 15,795,000,000 gold francs worth of damage while Belgian civilians were believed to have about 20 billion francs worth of claims against the Germans. However, the American Commission estimated the total damage at only about 23 billion francs, or 65% of the Belgian claim. Historian Jane Kathryn Miller suggests that it is possible the Belgians deliberately exaggerated their losses (and they ended up spending approximately the amount estimated by the American Commission), or their estimates

¹⁹⁰ Miller, pp. 27-8; Brand Whitlock, cited in Miller, p. 27.

¹⁹¹ J. Wullus-Rudiger, *Les Origines Internationales du Drame Belge de 1940* (Brussels: Vanderlinden, 1950), p. 12.

“were merely the result of the optimism of the first flush of victory.” In any case, the Belgians, who had lost 46,000 irreplaceable people with another 50,000 more maimed, felt they were due the money. This was especially so because the catastrophe had only come upon Belgium because of its faithfulness to the treaties of 1839 in not allowing the Germans free passage. The Belgians were released from their war debt, repaid in kind for cows and coal stolen by the Germans, and awarded 2.5 billion gold marks from the Germans: more than France received but less than they felt they deserved.¹⁹²

The Belgians would also be disappointed on the territorial front. You will recall that the Belgians resented aspects of the treaties of 1839, which left the Netherlands in control of the mouth of the Scheldt estuary and most of Limburg, as well as what became the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. Many Belgians felt they required a change of borders to make their country more defensible against a new invasion from the east. They had cast their eyes on Luxembourg which, they felt, had given in too easily to the Germans, and on Dutch Limburg, through which escaping German troops had passed without hindrance. The Belgians also felt they should control the mouth of the Scheldt through the acquisition of Dutch Zeeland, especially since Dutch control and neutrality had prevented the shipment of British reinforcements for the defense of besieged Antwerp. At the very least, the Belgians felt they should be allowed to base the left wing of their defense on the Scheldt. The Belgians argued that they had been forced into the 1839 treaties and since they had lost the benefits thereof they should not have to put up with the corresponding obligations. In the end, they got none of their territorial demands from Holland. British Prime Minister David Lloyd George and Woodrow Wilson were opposed to giving Holland German territory in exchange for the cession of Dutch land to

¹⁹² Miller, pp. 57-59, 87; Witte, *et al.*, p. 130.

Belgium while the British Admiralty opposed any change in the status of the Scheldt. Naturally, the Dutch did not feel like giving up any of their land. The Belgians retreated from demanding Limburg to demanding protection of Belgian interests there. They would later urge a joint defense of the area. They also wanted control and the defense of the locks “regulating the flow of water from Flanders.” This was important because a major factor (if not *the* major factor) in the survival of the Belgian army behind the Yser in World War One was the opening of the locks and the flooding of the area between the Belgian and the German lines. Belgium also wanted a canal linking Antwerp and Moerdijk. The Belgians got nothing from Holland.¹⁹³

Belgian hopes for a permanent seat on the Council of the League of Nations came to naught as did their hopes to gain formerly German East Africa, taken in large part by troops from the Belgian Congo. Great Britain got the coveted League of Nations mandate for the territory. This was later settled as Britain gave to Belgium the territories of Ruanda and Urundi from the mandate.¹⁹⁴

Belgium was, however, successful in two very important areas. It was awarded the western German territories of Eupen, Malmédy, and “neutral Moresnet,” which “were added to the claims, apparently as an afterthought” and inhabited mainly by Germans. These territories were very a contentious issue between Germany and Belgium during the Weimar Republic although Hitler initially eased off on the pressure to reunite the lands with Germany.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Miller, pp. 57, 71-74, 80-85; C. Terlinden, cited in Wullus-Rudiger, *Les Origines Internationales*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁹⁴ Miller, p. 85.

¹⁹⁵ David Hunter Miller, cited in Jane Kathryn Miller, pp. 73. The statement on Belgian-German relations regarding Eupen-Malmédy is based on the author’s own research into the archives of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Much more importantly (except for the people of Eupen-Malmédy), Belgium secured its release from the perpetual neutrality imposed upon it by the treaties of 1839. This had been urged even during the war. On July 27, 1917, the Belgian foreign minister declared that “[t]he international status established in 1831-1839 to guarantee the security of Belgium has lapsed because of the violation of the collective treaty by two of its signatories [Prussia/Germany and Austria/Austria-Hungary]. It must be revised.” On November 22, in a “discourse from the throne,” King Albert declared:

Belgium victorious and *emancipated from the neutrality* imposed on it by the treaties of which the war has shaken the foundation, will enjoy a complete independence. These treaties, which determined its position in Europe, did not protect it against the most criminal attack. They cannot survive the crisis of which the country has been the victim [emphasis in the original].

The Belgian argument was that because the treaties had not done their job--which was to protect Belgium—and because the treaties had been violated by its signatories, they were null and void and Belgium had the right to determine and practice its own foreign policy. Few Belgians challenged this position. Many of those who did, however, were in the “reactionary wing of the Catholic Party, led by the veteran Charles Woeste,” and argued that it was the statutory neutrality that had brought prompt French and British aid and should not be abandoned. The contrary position carried the day both in Belgium and in the other signatories of the Treaties of 1839 and Belgium was released from its obligation in this respect. During the interwar period, Belgium would follow a policy close to neutrality but would cherish its right to freely determine that policy. As Belgian Foreign Minister Baron Beyens had explained to Sir Edward Grey, the British secretary of state for foreign affairs, in 1916:

Neutrality being abolished, Belgium, decided to make all its efforts to assure its defense, does not, however, desire an alliance with great powers. An alliance fatally leads small states into the orbits of their great neighbors and confers on them politically the role of satellite. The Belgian people, so tested by the world war, aspires to an independence which would be weighed down neither with any international charge nor any political obligation.¹⁹⁶

The Versailles Treaty, when it was revealed to the Belgians, was not very popular.

Historian Jane Kathryn Miller notes, “[w]ounded in their pride, disappointed in their hopes for material gains, the Belgian people reacted strongly against the treaty. . . . It seemed to be taken for granted that Belgium would receive full reparations, revision of the treaties of 1839, and perhaps territorial acquisitions.” The Belgians were angered more by the paucity of reparations than by the failure to receive Limburg and the Scheldt Estuary. On May 4, 1919, Belgians paraded through their cities demanding full reparations. However, Belgium’s leaders felt they could not vote against even such a flawed treaty. On May 14, in response to a Socialist interpellation in the Chambre, Prime Minister Delacroix asked, rhetorically,

Gentlemen, what ought we to have done? There could be no question of our slipping out and refusing to sign the treaty. That would have been unjust. . . . It would have been unworthy of us; could we, in the face of the Germans, separate ourselves from our Allies? It would have been a fault against good taste; it would have been a fault belying our political and economic interests. [My ellipsis]¹⁹⁷

This attitude was taken by the parliament when it came time to ratify the treaty in August, 1919. Charles Woeste, speaking for the Catholics, called the treaty “not completely satisfactory. . . . The treaty as it has been drawn up has many undesirable aspects, and contains the germ of formidable conflicts [ellipsis in original]” but despite

¹⁹⁶ Quoted in Miller, p. 70; Quoted in Wullus-Rudiger, *Les Origins Internationales*, p. 58; Miller, 71; ARP-Capelle XV/1/25.

¹⁹⁷ Miller, pp. 86-92; Premier Delacroix quoted in Miller, p. 88.

that, found no clauses in it “contrary to Belgium’s honor,” and voted for ratification. The Socialists argued that despite the failure to obtain sufficient reparations and despite the locating of the seat of the League of Nations in Geneva rather than Brussels, the treaty should be ratified because it ended the war, because *some* reparations was better than *none*, given the ravished condition of the country, and because the treaty contained the seeds in the League of Nations of a universal organization for peace and friendship. Jane Kathryn Miller observes, “it is remarkable that whatever their complaints, not a single Belgian Socialist protested that the treaty was too hard on Germany.” Ten days later, in similar deliberations, the Belgian Senate also voted to ratify the treaty.¹⁹⁸

In his memoirs, Belgian Foreign Minister, and sometime Prime Minister, Paul-Henri Spaak, about whom much more will be said later, observed that:

The mistrust between Belgium and France stems from soon after the First World War. [French Premier] Clemenceau had little time for Hymans, the Belgian Foreign Minister, and behaved most unfairly towards him during the preliminary discussions on the Versailles Treaty. France gave no support to Belgium’s claims, and King Albert had to make a dramatic trip to Paris to uphold her interests. Whether or not these Belgian claims were reasonable I do not know, but our negotiators believed they could count on support from Paris. Those involved realized how greatly our hopes had been thwarted.¹⁹⁹

C. Belgium and the League of Nations

One reason the Belgians were hopeful was the formation of the League of Nations through Versailles and related treaties. The basic document of the League was its covenant, which consisted of twenty-six articles. The first seven articles spelled out the organization of the League: an assembly of all members, a council including permanent members Great Britain, France, Japan, Italy, and later Germany and the Soviet Union.

¹⁹⁸ Charles Woeste, quoted in Miller, p. 90; *ibid.*, pp. 90-2.

¹⁹⁹ Paul-Henri Spaak, *The Continuing Battle: Memoirs of a European 1936-1966*, Ray Steding, *et al.* trans (Boston: Little, Brown&Co., 1971), p. 10.

You will recall Belgium's disappointment at not getting a permanent seat on the Council. The Council also had four non-permanent members. There was also a secretariat. The first two of these bodies could debate any matters affecting peace and/or League members. However, unanimous decisions were required in each body for action to be taken. Articles VIII and IX addressed disarmament and created military commissions. These articles contributed to the post-war sense that "The War to End All War" had been fought, there would never be another one, and there would be an imminent global disarmament. As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, the Belgian military was allowed to drastically decline at this time because of this prevailing atmosphere. Article X guaranteed members against aggression while articles XI-XVII established a permanent international court to settle disputes and discussed sanctions to be taken against wrongdoers.²⁰⁰

Belgium took a particular interest in Article XVI, which declared that any member who went to war in violation of other Covenant articles would be considered to going to war against the entire League and would be subject to immediate economic and personal isolation. The article also called on the Council to assess how member states could use their armed forces "to protect the covenants of the League." Member states agreed "to support one another in the financial and economic measures which are taken under this Article" to offset the possible sacrifices required. States were required to provide free passage to any member forces going to the aid of the violated member. Thus, any League member could (in theory) count on the aid of all other members, except, presumably, of the member that had invaded it. This offered Belgium the guarantees it had lost through the revision of the Treaties of 1839. However, it also troubled the

²⁰⁰ *The New Columbia Encyclopedia*, s.v. League of Nations.

Belgians because it dictated that Belgian forces would be used for other interests having nothing to do with Belgium.²⁰¹

D. Belgium's Search for Security

Once Belgium was released from its obligatory neutrality, the diplomats of that country set about trying to reinforce its security by reaching military accords with its two former allies, France and Britain. Unfortunately for Belgium, Britain was back to playing its habitual balance of power game, supporting German positions against French ones to keep France from becoming too powerful. J. Wullus-Rudiger warns, "*if one loses from view the extreme complexity and the contradictions of European politics in the course of this period, principally the grave French-English differences, one cannot fail to carry erroneous judgments on the evolution of Belgian policy* [emphasis in the original]." In other words, Britain and France were no longer joined at the hip and this would complicate Belgian diplomacy because Belgium sought equal treaties with each. A further complication was that Britain had unsuccessfully counseled Belgium *not* to reject its neutrality.²⁰²

Belgium was able to reach a military accord with France by linking the issue to that of Luxembourg. Both France and Belgium sought economic and railroad union with the Grand Duchy after the war. The majority of Luxembourgeois inclined towards France but the French agreed not to press for a referendum in exchange for the military agreement, signed on September 7, 1920. The agreement consisted of two parts: one public, registered with the League of Nations, and consisting of an exchange of letters between the French and Belgian governments, and one secret. The former declared that

²⁰¹ Covenant of the League of Nations, Article 16, <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/leaguecov.htm>

²⁰² Wullus-Rudiger, *Les Origines Internationales*, pp. 58, 62.

“[t]he goal of this accord is to reinforce the guarantees of peace and of security resulting from the Covenant of the League of Nations.” Belgium was giving preeminence to the Covenant of the League, the guarantee of collective security. “It goes without saying that the sovereignty of the two states remains intact regarding the military charges that they impose on their respective countries and regarding the appreciation, in each case, of the fulfillment of the possibility in view of which the present accord is concluded.” In other words, there was nothing automatic about the treaty; the two nations would be free to construct their own military policies and they would be free to decide whether German action would trigger the arrangement.²⁰³

The latter, agreed to by the Belgian and French general staffs, started from the premise of the joint Franco-Belgian occupation of the Rhineland which then existed and provided for common action in the event of “an unprovoked German aggression.” It called for obligatory reinforcement of troops in the event of a German threat or invasion, a general mobilization in the event of a German mobilization, assistance in material production, the French defense of the Belgian coast, and a common war plan to be agreed upon by the two governments. The Belgian and French staffs would work out a “coordinated” defense of their eastern borders, including the eastern frontier of Luxembourg; a joint covering of the link-up of their forces; and would discuss mobilizing more forces in the event of German rearmament and threat.²⁰⁴

Given that the Germans never threatened nor attacked the Belgo-French forces in the Rhineland, this accord proved to be much more trouble than it was worth. The terms were kept secret, allowing all Belgian parties, especially the Flemish nationalists and the

²⁰³ Witte, *et al.*, p. 131; Text of the Franco-Belgian military accord of 1920, reproduced in Wullus-Rudiger, *Les Origines Internationales*, p. 333.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

Socialists, to read into it their deepest fears. The Flemings in particular feared increased French influence and both Flemings and Socialists were concerned that the treaty could draw Belgium into a war over France's commitments in East-Central Europe. Because the Belgian parliament never had the chance to ratify the agreement (it not being a formal treaty), the only way Flemings and Socialists could express their displeasure with it was to impede legislation on defense. In addition, many Belgian governments were forced to reach back-room deals in order to keep the pact from coming to a vote in Parliament.²⁰⁵

In 1929, a scandal broke regarding the treaty. *Het Dagblad*, a paper based in Utrecht, the Netherlands, published what purported to be the terms of the pact. According to these terms, Belgium would invade Dutch Limburg in the event of a Belgian or French war against Germany. Not surprisingly, the Dutch, with whom Belgian relations were strained, were very upset. Many Belgians were also upset, especially those Flemish nationalists who feared and/or distrusted France. Their campaigns against the treaty redoubled in fury. Ultimately, it turned out that the fake treaty, now known in Belgium as the "*Fausse d'Utrecht*," had been written by an *agent-provicateur* working for Belgian military intelligence and sold, by him, to "a gullible Frontist, who published it in order to further the Flemish policy of 'Los van Frankrijk'" ("away from France"). Belgium, claiming the *raison d'être* of the pact had lapsed, tried many times after the Rhineland was vacated to get out from under the pact but was stubbornly refused by France. As we will see later in this chapter, the Belgians and French finally agreed to rescind the pact

²⁰⁵ Pierre Renouvin, Jacques Willequet, *et al.*, *Les Relations Militaires Franco-Belges de mars 1936 au 10 mai 1940, Travaux d'un colloque d'historiens belges et français* (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1968), p. 17; Albert Crahay, *L'Armée belge entre les deux guerres* (Brussels?: Louis Musin, 1978), p. 64; Brian Bond, *Britain, France, and Belgium 1939-40*, 2nd ed. (London: Brassey's, 1990), p. 8; Émile Vandervelde and Pierre van Zuylen cited in Kieft, p. 6; Renouvin, p. 20; Général van Overstraeten, *Albert I-Leopold III; Vingt Ans de Politique Militaire Belge 1920-1940* (Brussels?: Desclée de Brouwer, ND), p. 38; Wullus-Rudiger, *Les Origines Internationales*, p. 63.

the day before the Germans re-militarized the Rhineland and they kept, temporarily the part of the pact involving staff talks.²⁰⁶

Belgium, which had a tradition of “a confidence, an amity, and a special friendship” with the United Kingdom, was at least as interested in a military accord with Britain as it was in one with France. Belgium was continually rejected after the Great War because Belgium had rejected British advice to stay neutral and had associated itself with France—a step Britain was unwilling to take because it did not want to be involved, even indirectly, in French policies against Germany or in East Central Europe. In November, 1920, a declaration by Belgian Prime Minister Delacroix that a deal had been reached with Britain was denied by British Prime Minister Lloyd George. The next July, King Albert visited London, where he tried unsuccessfully to get a British complement to the French accord. Britain’s counteroffer was a five year guarantee if Belgium would return to neutrality. This was unacceptable to the Belgians, who had struggled so hard to get out from under it.²⁰⁷

In January 1922, at a conference in Cannes, Anglo-French relations having improved to the point where a draft alliance was being rumored, Belgian Foreign Minister Henri Jaspar proposed an agreement to Lloyd George who was interested. However, the draft showed that both France and Britain still considered Belgium to be a neutral. In negotiations, Jaspar was able to eliminate the word “neutral” and guaranteed that Belgium would defend its borders against attack. Britain promised to immediately intervene with land, sea, and air forces in the event of such an attack. The French had difficulty with the draft treaty because it did not specify Germany as the potential

²⁰⁶ Miller, p. 183.

²⁰⁷ Wullus-Rudiger, *Les Origines Internationales*, p. 69.

aggressor and the French resented being lumped in with them. However, this ambiguity was good for Foreign Minister Jaspar because it covered him with the Flemish nationalists who considered a French invasion possible. Unfortunately, the warm Anglo-French relations were due to personal chemistry and when French Premier Briand's government fell, so did hopes for an Anglo-French agreement, which made an Anglo-Belgian agreement unlikely because the British again wanted nothing to do with the French. Britain, which had frequently warned Belgium about the dangers of an alliance with France, was also angry at Belgium for following the French into additional occupations of German soil in 1920 and 1923 to compel the Germans to obey the Versailles Treaty. A note from British Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon on August 11, 1923, put paid to the last lingering hope for an agreement.²⁰⁸

E. Belgium and reparations

Belgium, devastated by the war, had a strong interest in getting what the Germans owed them. The Germans had destroyed "100,000 houses and 1200 public buildings. . . causing a housing shortage that demanded attention at once." Germany had also damaged many canals and railroads and dismantled or destroyed the vast majority of Belgian iron and steel works. In addition, much arable land had lain under water since the flooding before the Yser in 1914. The Belgians had a lot of work before them and they intended to use German money, as insufficient as they felt it to be, to pay for it. As we have seen, the Belgian government and people were agreed that they had been shortchanged in the reparations and were unwilling to make any further concessions to Germany or even to its own former allies. France, much of whose industry was also destroyed by the Germans,

²⁰⁸ Miller, pp. 184-5.

was equally “intransigent” but Britain was unwilling to incur the economic damage potentially caused by a ruined Germany and urged a softer line.²⁰⁹

Things came to a head in January 1923 after the Germans had declared themselves unable to pay their reparations, in particular, the coal they owed to France. France demanded full payment and harsh punishments while Britain proposed a four-year moratorium on payments and a reduction of Germany’s obligations. Part of the British plan was the abolition of Belgium’s priority in receiving German reparations. Not surprisingly, this was opposed by the Belgians, who sided with the French, as did the Italians. The Germans were declared in default on January 9 and on January 11, the French and Belgian armies, supported by Italian engineers, occupied the Ruhr Basin, the heart of German industry. Belgium was pressured into the action by the fear of alienating itself from France and to avoid being economically isolated with the French to the south and east (in the Ruhr) and the still unfriendly Dutch to the north, still controlling the mouth of the Scheldt leading to Antwerp. The Belgian Socialists opposed the attack and their leader, Emile Vandervelde, resigned from the cabinet, but even they demanded Belgian priority and full reparations. The debate was only over how these were to be obtained.²¹⁰

The military aspects of the “brutal” invasion of the Ruhr will be discussed in the next chapter, but what are important here are the negative consequences of the Belgian action. It drew international condemnation. We have already seen that this invasion finally killed any chance of Belgium’s reaching a military agreement with Britain. The action was also counterproductive because far from facilitating the operations of the

²⁰⁹ Ernest Mahaim, ed., cited in Miller, p. 110; Miller, pp. 110-111.

²¹⁰ Miller, pp. 118-123; Witte, *et al.*, pp. 131-2.

Allied Mission of Control, it led to strikes and passive resistance on the part of the Ruhr Germans supported by the fledgling German Weimar Republic. The Belgians and French found themselves forced to send in more troops to widen the occupation and to persuade the Germans to get back to work and, when that failed, to work the mines and railroads themselves. Passive resistance turned to active resistance and sabotage and the German government was going bankrupt financially supporting the rebels. On September 27, 1923, the German Chancellor, Friedrich Ebert, was forced to declare an end to the passive resistance. Historian of France Gordon Wright argues that the Ruhr occupation was a pyrrhic victory at best for France not only because it cost more to recover the reparations than they were worth but also because the French, who were divided on the whole idea, were thereafter unwilling to pursue an independent foreign policy “in defiance, if necessary, of world opinion.” As the Belgian ambassador to Paris, Baron de Gaiffier de Herstroy²¹¹, informed Paul Hymans in October 1933, France was unwilling to act alone to prevent Germany from rearming in defiance of the Versailles Treaty. “It would immediately raise the most insidious commentaries in London and in Rome where France is unfailingly reproached for troubling the peace and of risking, by its requirements, igniting a new war.” The French could have successfully acted alone up to the German remilitarization of the Rhineland but they needed British validation. “Such a

²¹¹ Baron Edmond Ferdinand Félix de Gaiffier was born on May 30, 1866 and named legation attaché in 1887. The next year, he started service in Berlin. He was promoted to legation secretary 2nd class the same year and was transferred to Lisbon in 1890. He was promoted to legation secretary 1st class in 1891 and went to Madrid in 1893, returning to Lisbon the next year. Also in 1894 he went to the embassy in Vienna. In 1896 he was named legation counselor and went to the central administration. In 1902 he went to the Peking embassy and became minister resident there in 1904. Three years later he went to Cairo and two years later he transferred to Bucharest. In 1912 he was named Director General of Political Affairs at the Department. In 1916 he became extraordinary envoy and minister plenipotentiary in France and three years later he was named extraordinary ambassador in Paris. He continued serving in Paris until May 31, 1935. He died there less than three months later. He was awarded Grand Cross of the Order of Leopold II, the Civic Cross, first class, and the Grand Cross of the Order of the Crown. Personal communication with M. Didier Amaury, librarian, Diplomatic Archives, Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs June 16, 2005.

change of attitude in Paris might have had merit if this had been an era of wise and constructive British leadership. . . . But Paris gained little by grudgingly abdicating the initiative to a series of British cabinets that meant well but lacked the qualities of tough-mindedness and foresight.” Sir Roger Keyes, son of the British admiral and hero of World War I who served as liaison to Kings Albert and Leopold, notes that British pacifism and appeasement in the mid-1930s led to Leopold’s increasing conviction that war was coming and that British and French interest in upholding Locarno and protecting Belgium was waning.²¹²

The international situation was eased in the summer of 1924 with the acceptance by the interested governments of the report of the Dawes Commission—an international body of economists headed by American Charles Gates Dawes—established at American urging to figure out what to do about German reparations. The report called for an end to the Allied occupation of the Ruhr, more stringent conditions for sanctions, and an affirmation of Germany’s responsibilities although these were reduced and Belgium was once again “disappointed” by the share of reparations allotted to it. The Allies left the Ruhr on November 15, 1924, a month before the deadline imposed by the Dawes Commission. The German economy recovered and produced a few glorious years of prosperity before the international economic collapse of 1929 slammed the country and, in part, led to the advent of Adolf Hitler.²¹³

F. Locarno

²¹² Witte, *et al.*, 131-2; Miller, 122-123; Gordon Wright, *France in Modern Times from the Enlightenment to the Present*, 5th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), p. 335; de Gaiffier to Hymans, Paris, October 20, 1933 in *Documents Diplomatiques Belges 1920-1940: La Politique de sécurité extérieure, Tome III: Période 1931-1936*, eds. Ch. De Visscher and F. Van Langenhove (Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1964) [Henceforth “DDB III”], p. 206; Roger Keyes, *Outrageous Fortune: The Tragedy of Leopold III of the Belgians, 1901-1941* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1984), p. 49.

²¹³ Gordon A. Craig, *Germany 1866-1945*, Oxford History of Modern Europe (New York: Oxford UP, 1980), p. 514; Miller, p. 132.

The 1925 Locarno Pact was, with the Covenant of the League of Nations, one of the foundations of Belgian foreign policy in the era of collective security. As Belgian Foreign Minister Paul Hymans instructed the Belgian ambassador in London, Baron de Cartier de Marchienne²¹⁴, to tell British diplomat Sir Eric Simon in 1933, Locarno

forms the cornerstone of our policy. We are firmly decided to fulfill all the duties that the Treaty imposes on us, but by reason of the weight of these engagements and of the sacrifices to which they could eventually lead for such a small country, as geographically exposed as ours, we do not intend to see our obligations extend beyond these boundaries: ‘all of Locarno but nothing [other] than Locarno’ (without neglecting, of course, our duties *vis-à-vis* the League of Nations).²¹⁵

The Locarno Pact got its start on February 9, 1925, when German Foreign Minister Stresemann suggested to the French that they mutually guarantee their border. The Belgians noticed with alarm the absence of any reference to them in the proposal although they were reassured by the British and French that they would be treated as equals and covered under the treaty. On August 26, the British and French jointly announced a forthcoming conference in the Swiss resort town of Locarno on Lake Maggiore, to which Germany would be invited. In their acceptance note, the Germans raised the issue of war guilt and were bluntly rejected by the British and French while the

²¹⁴ Emile de Cartier de Marchienne (1871-1946) was named an attaché on February 8, 1893 and first served in Vienna. He was transferred five months later to Constantinople and then went back to Vienna, where he was promoted in 1894. He also served in Belgrade, Rio, Tokyo, where he was promoted again in 1897. He went on to Peking, Paris, and retired in 1905. The next year, he was sent to Paris and became Counselor of the London Embassy, married, and later went to Washington, where he was named minister resident. His first wife died around that time. He arrived in Peking as envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to the Chinese emperor on May 26, 1910. He returned to Washington in 1917, married again in 1919, and then served in Havana, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. He arrived in London again on June 10, 1927, where he was the Belgian ambassador until his death in London on May 10, 1946. Among his decorations were the Civic Medal, first class (1919) and the Commander of the Order of Leopold. Didier Amaury, librarian, Diplomatic Archives, Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, e-mail message to the author, June 7, 2005.

²¹⁵ Hymans to Baron de Cartier de Marchienne, Brussels, February 17, 1933, in DDB III: 51.

Belgians reminded them that their own chancellor had admitted in 1914 that they had violated Belgian neutrality.²¹⁶

The discussions began on October 5 and took place under strict secrecy. One of the first issues taken up was how to square the Franco-Belgian accord of 1920 with the proposed new treaty. Belgian delegate Emile Vandervelde explained that the two were “complementary” in that the former simply specified how the two countries would assist each other in the event of an attack while the latter bound each signatory to assist the others in the event of an unprovoked attack. Both treaties were defensive and thus not in opposition. Another discussion revolved around the guarantee of Belgium’s eastern frontier. Stresemann initially refused to guarantee the Belgian border because that would have meant writing off the recently-lost territory of Eupen-Malmédy. French delegate Aristide Briand supported Vandervelde and Stresemann had to give in although he received an assurance that Germany might still eventually get the territory back.²¹⁷

The delegates wrapped up their work on October 16 by signing five different pacts. The most important one for the Belgians was the Rhenish Pact, in which France, Britain, Italy, and Germany guaranteed Belgium’s and France’s eastern borders as defined by the Versailles Treaty. However, and this would lead to Belgian domestic and foreign problems, Belgium also guaranteed the borders of the other signatories while all five Locarno powers undertook to come to the aid of the others in the event of an unprovoked attack. The pact also recognized the demilitarization of the Rhineland as required by Articles 42 and 43 of the Versailles Treaty. All signatories repudiated war except in self-defense or as required by Article 16 of the Covenant of the League of

²¹⁶ Miller, pp. 187-8; Gordon Craig has the first step a proposal given to the British on January 20, 1925; Craig, p. 516.

²¹⁷ Miller, p. 189.

Nations. Thus, Locarno and the Covenant were mutually reinforcing. Mechanisms to peacefully resolve disputes and to enforce the treaty were included and Belgian neutrality was expressly repudiated. Germany undertook to accept all the obligations of a member of the League of Nations and requested admission to that body. The signing of Locarno and of the Covenant represented for many Europeans the end of war because international relations would be regulated by the principle that “the wrong done to a state signifies a wrong done to all.” All members were to be united against any aggressor, thus, in theory at least, nobody would dare to aggress. Unfortunately, as J. Wullus-Rudiger points out, “in fact, this solidarity did not manifest itself. Japan, Italy, and Germany were able to perpetrate an aggression without being punished or prevented from reaching their goal.” In any case, as Els Witte *et al.* point out, the Locarno Pact, by giving Belgium *four* guarantors, allowed Belgium “to ease its military dependence on France.”²¹⁸

In 1928 came another treaty that seemed to put war far from Europe. The Kellogg-Briand Pact, named for its creators, the American secretary of state and the French foreign minister, outlawed war. Signatories, which, in addition to Italy and the Soviet Union, ultimately included Germany, promised not to make war. This was the high point of collective security and it is not coincidental that this was the low point of the Belgian Army of the interwar period.²¹⁹

G. Disarmament

The early interwar period also saw much progress towards disarmament. The 1921-1922 Washington Conference and the 1930 London Naval Conference limited

²¹⁸ Miller, pp. 189-’90; Witte *et al.*, p. 132; Wullus-Rudiger, *Les Origines Internationales*, pp. 30-1.

²¹⁹ Wullus-Rudiger, *Les Origines Internationales*, p. 31. The last point is the author’s own.

warship construction while the League of Nations had started working on the issue in 1925 and by 1931 it was ready for a conference to finalize the arrangements. Germany had already been disguising military build-up by creating numerous para-military organizations, reaching an agreement with the Soviet Union to train tankers and pilots in Russia, and developing prototypes for guns, planes, tanks, and submarines through foreign companies. The disarmament conference opened in Geneva, Switzerland in February 1932, but soon bogged down over French refusal to disarm and German demands for “equality” (*Gleichberichtigung*) of armaments. The Belgian position was that first “all cruel offensive arms, such as bombers, heavy artillery, poisonous gas, and biological warfare” had to be stopped with a powerful international commission to keep things on track. After that, arms could be reduced but with Belgium keeping what was necessary for self-defense. Everybody except the Frontists agreed that “Belgium must be the first to desire disarmament; the last to be able to disarm *before the others*.” The conference was continuing when Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany and everything changed. In March, 1933, the Belgian delegate to the conference observed that “my very clear impression is that Germany is preparing for a future which, without doubt, is not far off, in which to attempt to liberate itself from articles 42 and 43 of the Treaty of Versailles, and from the dispositions of the Rhenish Pact which are connected with them.” Five months later, Baron de Gaiffier d’Hestroy, who had spoken with his German counterpart, reported that “Germany seems decided to rearm; it is about to make its projects known to France; it does not allow itself to be diverted by objections drawn from the existence of treaties.”²²⁰

²²⁰ *New Columbia Encyclopedia*, sv. “Disarmament Conference”; Diary entry for 18 December 1933 in van Overstraeten, p. 99; Count de Kerchove de Denterghem (Belgian minister to Germany) to Hymans, Berlin,

Towards the end of the disarmament conference, Paul Hymans pointed out to the British ambassador to Brussels, Sir G. Clerk, that the big problem with disarmament was German rearmament.

[A]ccomplished in violation of treaties, the fact of German rearmament has shaken confidence in the value of new dispositions of arms limitation. It also weakens the security of Belgium. We must, while taking account of it, strive to correct its unfortunate consequences.

To this effect, it is necessary to restore confidence in the value of the new international engagements which would be contracted, in creating serious guarantees of control and execution.²²¹

In fact, as the noted historian of Nazi Germany Gerhard Weinberg points out, by that point, the Germans had no interest in reaching a real agreement: “Since the two contingencies under which Germany would walk out. . . were precisely the two alternatives that the German delegation consistently argued for in the Geneva talks, the mendacity of their negotiating position is obvious.” Germany finally walked out of the disarmament conference *and the League of Nations* on October 14, 1933. Baron de Gaiffier estimated that “when I reflect on the current bad situation, I find, immediately, the vicious dispositions of Berlin and its intention to escape military control, the timidity and hesitations of London, the desire of Italy to handle Germany carefully, and the efforts of France to dodge disarmament while feigning to accept it. Berlin has alarmed Europe. . .”²²²

As de Gaiffier pointed out, the German step had “alarmed Europe,” and, among many others, Belgium. Foreign Minister Paul Hymans told the Belgian Chamber that:

March 28, 1933, DDB III: 79-80; Miller, p. 204; Sénat, *Documents*, Feb. 27, 1929 quoted in Miller, *Ibid*; Note from M. Bourquin, DDB III: 65; Baron de Gaiffier to Hymans, Paris, August 8, 1933, DDB III: 141.

²²¹ Conversation between Paul Hymans and Sir G. Clerk, Brussels, April 13, 1934, in DDB III: 346

²²² Gerhard L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, vol. 1, “Diplomatic Revolution in Europe 1933-36” (Chicago, U. of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 161-2; DDB III: 185, ff. 1; Baron de Gaiffier to Hymans, Paris, October 20, 1933, DDB III: 207.

The future is full of darkness. Without doubt, Chancellor Hitler has persistently affirmed in solemn and repeated declarations his will for peace and his desire for an understanding with France.

But the precipitous retreat of Germany from the disarmament conference and from the League of Nations, the suddenness and abruptness of this rupture seem a worrying symptom.

The German people live in a fever. The exaltation of passions, the military training of the youth formed in the camps can lead to adventures.

Finally, in certain sensitive regions of Europe accidents are possible.²²³

Not even the Germans were prepared for the reaction to their move. Count de Kerchove²²⁴, the Belgian minister in Berlin, reported that the Chancellery and the Ministry of Propaganda were “stupefied” by the international outcry, which was fueled by the fear of a rapidly rearming and threatening Germany. Germany’s departure from the disarmament conference meant Germany potentially would recognize no limits on its armaments. This was threatening to the Belgians in general and specific ways. The Belgian documents are full of expressions of concern about a new arms race leading to a new war into which the Belgians would inevitably be drawn because Belgium would once again become Germany’s first victim. Ambassador de Kerchove, in a report written less than a month before Germany’s twin departures, recommended that, although the rearming Germany would not be militarily nor politically ready for war by 1935, *“from the Belgian point of view, properly speaking, it is indispensable to prepare for the future and to construct, here and now, the defenses necessary to remove from Germany the very*

²²³ Chambre des Représentants—*Annales Parlementaires, séance du Mercredi 29 Novembre 1933*, p. 151, in AMBAE 11179, *sous-farde* 1933.

²²⁴ André de Kerchove de Denterghem (1885-1945) began his diplomatic career as an attaché in Tokyo in 1908 and also served in London, Berlin, Bucharest, the Hague. He was the governor of East Flanders from 1921 to 1931 before being named Minister to Berlin. He was promoted to envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary on October 7, 1935 and was sent to Paris two days later. From March 1938 to 1941, he would be the Belgian ambassador to Rome. He finished his career as the ambassador to Lisbon with responsibility of obtaining food and supplies for occupied Belgium. In addition to Belgian medals such as the Commander of the Order of the Crown, Kerchove also received decorations from Italy, Holland, France, and Great Britain. Didier Amaury, e-mail message to the author, June 7, 2005.

temptation to recommence the experience of 1914 [my emphasis].” The Count went on to urge increased spending on fortifications and weapons, including chemical weapons. He concluded by citing Belgium’s very exposed position and reminded the Belgian foreign minister of “the Roman adage: *Si vis pacem, para bellum*” [“If you want peace, prepare for war”]. The next year, Count de Kerchove urged increased defensive preparation: “It is thus in the establishment of means of defense against a sudden motorized attack that it is necessary to draw the attention of the Government of the King. . . .” The Belgians were not the only ones to be nervous. In the report of a conversation in Geneva with foreign ministers from Poland (Josef Beck) and Sweden (M. Sanders), as well as ambassadors from Finland (M. Holma) and Estonia (M. Strandman), Paul Hymans notes the unanimity of the diplomats in fearing war “in two or three years.”²²⁵

On March 6, 1934, Prime Minister De Broqueville told the Senate that there were only two ways to prevent Germany from rearming: recourse to Article 113 of Versailles, which allowed for League of Nations inspectors, or “preventive war.” Neither option was acceptable. The first would founder on the unwillingness of Italy and Britain to support investigations and the second was simply unthinkable. “It is not permitted to provoke an immediate and certain evil while there remains a hope of arrangement.” The Belgians hoped to remedy the situation through the negotiation of a new pact that would “impose a limit and institute a control today completely inexistent.” A failure to do so would lead to “the free rearmament of Germany and the arms race.” Minister Hymans put his hope in an agreement between France, Britain, and Italy that would lead to an international

²²⁵Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, October 17, 1933, DDB III: 190; Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, September 20, 1933, DDB III: 147; *ibid.*, pp. 145-152; de Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, April 19, 1934, p. 3, in AMBAE 11185/3, “Defense Militaire Belge”; Paul Hymans, Geneva, September 26, 1933, AMBAE 11179.

convention. However, a French note of April 17, 1934 put paid to that by rejecting any discussion on arms limitation because Germany had overtly violated the Treaty of Versailles by pursuing rearmament, as evidenced by the publication of German defense spending. Unfortunately, Hymans saw only two alternatives. One was a preventive war, which was rejected by Prime Minister de Broqueville, who still held out hope for an agreement. It was also rejected by the French (although French Generalissimo Weygand gave mixed signals) and prohibited by Locarno. The other was a new arms limitation convention. In any case, Anglo-French accord was necessary for the success of any policy. Hymans declared, "It is important now, in conclusion, to determine the political line we must follow. Firstly, our first duty is to neglect nothing in order to assure the defense of our territory. In the political domain, we must continue our effort to aid in realizing an entente between the great powers." Unfortunately, the entente, the 1935 Italo-Franco-British Stresa Front, established in response to the German introduction of conscription, led to nothing as it almost immediately fractured due to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia.²²⁶

German rearmament continued to alarm Belgium through 1935. On February 16, 1935, less than a month before Hitler announced German conscription and open rearmament, Count de Kerchove reported that the British, French, and Italian ambassadors to Germany all believed that war was "inevitable" and would start in 3-4 years and he adjured the Belgian Government to "envisage all the measures to take to endure a war with the minimum of horror. . . ." In a May 7, 1935 letter to Minister of

²²⁶ "The discourse of M. De Broqueville to the Senate, quoted in van Overstraeten, diary entry for March 6, 1934, pp. 105-6; Note from the Belgian Government to the French Government, Brussels, December 16, 1933, DDB III: 262; Exposé de M. Hymans to the Council of Ministers, held under the presidency of the King, April 24, 1934, DDB III: 349-53, 358, 361-2; M. de Broqueville to the Belgian Senate, quoted in the diary entry for March 6, 1934, van Overstraeten, pp. 105-6; Miller, p. 213.

National Defense Devèze (who will be discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter), Minister de Kerchove wrote that, although a sudden German attack on the Western Front was “*extremely improbable* [emphasis in the original]” for various reasons, Belgium is on the “outposts of the Western World *vis-à-vis* Germany and it is, evidently, the first country which will be invaded by the German armies.” Consequently, Belgium must always be able to stop an invader until the Allies came to help.²²⁷

On March 17, 1935²²⁸, several days after officially announcing the creation of a German air force, the *Luftwaffe*, in an “Appeal to the German People,” Adolf Hitler proclaimed German universal military service and the creation of a 36-division army (Belgium had only fifteen divisions, including reserves). The Belgian ambassador to Berlin wrote “this day is called to have a capital importance in the history of the world. . . . nobody imagined that Hitler would push audacity up to placing the world, and especially the signatory Powers of the Versailles Treaty, before a *fait accompli*.” The Versailles Treaty was dead; there remained only Locarno and the Rhenish Pact. “The future alone will tell how long Germany will respect them and it is with a growing apprehension that all my colleagues, without exception see the approach of the moment where. . . . the new war with Germany will become inevitable.”²²⁹

Ambassador de Kerchove recommended a collective protest of all the signatories of the Versailles Treaty; something had to be done lest Germany keep acting without restraint. “We have no illusions, all our concessions, all our attempts at conciliation have been considered as weakness.” The Belgian military attaché in Berlin, Lieutenant-

²²⁷De Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, February 16, 1935, in ARP-GVO 4 1935A; de Kerchove to Devèze, May 7, 1935, in ARP-GVO 4 1935A, pp. 7-11;

²²⁸ Other documents have the German action as March 16. See, for example, Schmit to Minister of National Defense, Berlin, March 20, 1935, in MRA-BAFM 29 (185-2-46).

²²⁹ Weinberg, I: 205; de Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, March 17, 1935, pp. 1, 15.

General Schmit, reported that “at the completion of the German reorganization, the peacetime French and German armies will have a fairly similar size.” The French military attaché told him of the worry of the French ambassador that the two countries would some day have armies as unequal as their populations. In the end, no concrete action beyond protests was taken—British diplomats did not even cancel their planned trip to Germany--and German rearmament was slowed not at all although this rearmament appeared, at the beginning, oriented towards the east and southeast rather than towards Belgium. That April, General Schmit reported that “recently one has been able to see, for the first time, German assault tanks, near the camp at Zossen, where their instruction is centralized; these are light tanks of the [British] Carden-Lloyd type, with a machine gun or a light cannon.”²³⁰

To add to the concern, a report from Lieutenant-General Cumont, the Belgian Chief of Staff, analyzed General Schmit’s reports of 1933-1935, showing all the instances where he was mistaken, concluding that although Schmit’s work was “praiseworthy,” “we must not hope to be warned by the reports of military attachés of [any] immediate danger that the warlike Reich constitutes for its neighbors, in enough time for us to be able to stave it off by the necessary countermeasures.” And that September, General Schmit warned that the Germans were definitely motorizing and mechanizing their army, with one motorized division already formed and two others coming in the spring of 1936. “When Germany will possess three powerful units of this type, reinforced by the multiple

²³⁰de Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, March 17, 1935, pp. 15, 4, in ARP-GVO 4 1935A; Schmit to Minister of National Defense, Berlin, March 20, 1935, in MRA-BAFM 29 (185-2-46), #24; Weinberg I:205-206; Schmit to Minister of National Defense, Berlin, June 29, 1935, p. 2, in MRA-BAFM 29 (185-2-47)#5; Schmit to Minister of National Defense, Berlin, April 15, 1935, p. 3, in MRA-BAFM 29 (185-2-47), #144.

motorcycle formations of the N.S.K.K.²³¹, the problem of the sudden attack posed by [former German commander-in-chief and architect of the interwar German army] von Seeckt would have received a very appreciable beginning of the solution.” However, he remained convinced that the German Army was unready for a war and “incapable of mobilizing, in normal lengths of time, the masses indispensable for the unleashing of a grand-style offensive inspired by the prewar Schlieffen plan.”²³²

H. Belgium and Germany

What was the state of bilateral relations during this time?

Belgian relations with Germany in the last years of the Weimar Republic were dominated by the question of Eupen-Malmédy, which Germany wanted back. German demands, both in the media and through diplomacy, were strident and incessant. Many Germans wanted to get the territories back by any means. The pressure eased in the early days of the Third Reich. Count de Kerchove reported that “the Hitlerian government at this moment does not think at all of perpetuating the state of tension existing between Belgium and Germany since 1918 and its action of racial assimilation carries itself infinitely more towards perpetually menaced Austria than to the cantons, [which have] very little importance for the whole of the country.” In fact, Hitler himself informed the Belgian minister that Germany was not interested in recovering its lost western provinces. Minister de Kerchove reported that “I have concluded from it that Hitler intended clearly to affirm to me his will not to maintain the claims of the

²³¹ *Nationalsozialistische Kraftfahr-Korps* (National Socialist Motor Vehicle Corps), a paramilitary motorized unit. Liliane and Fred Funcken, *Arms and Uniforms: The Second World War*, Part 1: France, Germany, Austria, Russia, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Belgium, 1933-41 (London: Ward Lock, 1975), p. 58.

²³² “*Note pour Monsieur le Ministre*” by Cumont, Brussels, July 12, 1935, p. 6, in MRA-BAFM 29 (185-2-48); Schmit to the Minister of National Defense, Berlin, November 18, 1935, p. 7, in MRA-BAFM 29 (185-2-49).

Wilhelmstrasse²³³ and of the parliamentary republic on Eupen-Malmédy.” This pledge was repeated in 1935 by Hitler and Göring, who assured Minister de Kerchove, and his wife, that Hitler considered the western borders of the Reich to be fixed and that the Nazi leaders permanently rejected any new invasion of Belgium.²³⁴

Although the Hitler regime eased the pressure about Eupen-Malmédy, the new regime alarmed the Belgians. Foreign Minister Hymans wrote to Baron de Cartier, the Belgian ambassador to Britain:

Germany traverses at this moment a crisis which could be fraught with consequences from the point of view of peace: the revisionist demands are heard higher and more imperiously and do not even respect the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles which were confirmed at Locarno: Eupen-Malmédy and the demilitarization of the Rhenish provinces are put back into question. What will be the reactions of France in the presence of Germany’s new attitude? We do not know, but the future appears to us full of uncertainty and danger.²³⁵

As we have seen, as Germany left the disarmament conference, it also left the League of Nations. This could mean, as a German bureaucrat in the Wilhelmstrasse told the Belgian ambassador, that Germany would consider itself freed from any obligations incurred through the League—including Locarno. Baron de Cartier, summed things up for Paul Hymans:

The political status of Belgium reposes today entirely on the Covenant of the League of Nations and on the Rhenish Pact. . . . And yet the League of Nations currently represents a pillar which, unhappily, is shaken, at first by the withdrawal of Japan and by that of Germany. . . . The Rhenish Pact was negotiated and signed by a government, in Germany, whose spirit is scorned by the current leaders of the Reich. . . .

²³³ The German Foreign Ministry. This is equivalent to referring to the presidency as “The White House.”

²³⁴ This is the author’s conclusion based on research into the archives of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. See also Miller, p. 100; de Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, July 22, 1933, p. 4 in AMBAE 11179; de Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, May 28, 1934 DDB III: 380; de Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, March 19, 1935, in ARP-GVO 4, *sous-farde* 1935A.

²³⁵ Hymans to Baron de Cartier, Brussels, February 17, 1933, DDB III: 53.

The consequence [of the German rejection of Versailles and other previous treaties] is that at the present time the German promise of non-aggression, signed by Stresemann in 1925, is not far from constituting a trap.²³⁶

For his part, Hymans insisted to the Italian and French ambassadors that the Entente powers must hang together. “The isolation of Germany is the sole preventative against a catastrophe. . . . Finally, I insisted strongly on the necessity of affirming that the Locarno Pact remains standing and intact. It constitutes the best guarantee of peace and security.”²³⁷

The German press closely followed Belgian military affairs. In the latter days of the Weimar Republic, Robert Everts, the Belgian minister in Berlin, had commented to Paul Hymans that “Nothing better betrays the secret hopes of the revanchist parties than the care they take for our disarmament.” In February 1933, a Belgian Foreign Ministry information bulletin stated that “our organization and our policy of war feed, in principal order, German rancor. Allusions are found there in the most unexpected documents; a technician studying the causes of the Belgian financial crisis attributed to it two origins: Belgian military policy and the increasing expenses imposed by the Franco-Belgian accord. . . .” Headlines in papers in the *Reich* included “The iron fist of Belgium against Germany,” “Belgium ready to attack Germany,” “The Rhineland, Belgian zone of concentration,” “They arm without cease,” “Aachen under Belgian guns,” “Eupen and Malmédy: objective of Belgian [General Staff],” “The Belgian wall of fire,” and “The Franco-Belgian Chinese wall.” This inversion of reality was the view the leaders of the *Reich* wanted its citizens to have of Belgium. In February 1935, General Schmit, in

²³⁶ Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, October 19, 1933, DDB III: 200; Cartier to Hymans, London, March 6, 1934, DDB III: 328.

²³⁷ Paul Hymans, DDB III: 196.

Berlin, reported that “The dailies, the reviews, the military-historical works bring tirelessly the same tendentious note on the subject of the inveterate militarism of our country. The iron discipline to which the German press is subjected leaves us in no doubt as to the official inspiration of this campaign.”²³⁸

German ire was mainly aimed at Belgian fortifications; the German press claimed the Belgians wanted “to create a concrete wall from the North Sea to Arlon, to prolong the French fortification system,” to deploy to Liège guns able to hit Aachen, and to use the territories received at Versailles as the first line of defense. Count de Kerchove noted that “Germany follows with a strong worry the defense of our frontiers, which thwarts its projects of eventual invasion. . . . The discontent that the Germans fail to hide on the subject of our fortifications is the best proof of the necessity that there is to continue and, more, to intensify, if necessary, our policy of the military defense of our frontiers.”

The German allegations were ridiculous; the Belgians understood their fortifications and, indeed, their military in general, to be purely defensive, to ward off another German invasion. We will see more evidence of this in the next chapter; suffice it now to consider an internal Belgian Foreign Ministry note that describes the Belgian fortifications and concludes, “It is an ensemble of protective works, of an exclusively defensive character. They are in harmony with the traditional policy of all the Belgian governments; none of them, ever, envisaged an aggression against anybody, no more towards Germany than towards any other country.” The Germans also complained about Belgian efforts at anti-aircraft defense. On February 17, 1935, General Schmit reports that “The *Völkischer*

²³⁸ M. Robert Everts [Belgian minister in Berlin] to Paul Hymans, p. 3. in AMBAE 11.183/2, *sous-farde* 1931; “Bulletin de renseignements no. 419,” February 13, 1933, pp. 1-2 in AMBAE 11179, *farde* 1933; Schmit to Minister of National Defense, Berlin, February 17, 1935, p. 1; MRA-BAFM 29 (185-2-46).

*Beobachter*²³⁹ writes spitefully ‘the Belgian anti-aircraft protection is organized in a manner analogous to the French; to remark, however, that the Belgian air fleet largely exceeds the proportions indicated by its total population.’²⁴⁰

The German press frequently harped on the purported Franco-Belgian relationship and accused Belgium of being a French “vassal.” This, again, predated the Hitler regime; a November 1932 report from the Count de Kerchove notes that

the well-known argument of French pressure on our country reproduces itself frequently *à propos* [Belgian fortification construction]. Some rare German journals believe themselves able to explain our apprehensions by a ‘pathological fear’ of Germany, which pushes us to armaments scarcely in rapport with our finances, and to “alliances against nature.”

A 1933 report by F. du Chastel noted that “it is necessary to note. . . an accentuation of the tendency of the German Government to consider Belgium as subservient to the French policy and to the French military system. This point of view, spread in the German public, constitutes a great danger for the future of our country.” The complaints continued through most of 1935, although General Schmit reported on September 4, 1935 that “since some weeks ago, the tone of the German press happily modified itself when it treats questions relating to our country; the tendentious information of a military order, the reproaches of vassalage with regard to France. . . have temporarily disappeared.”²⁴¹

I. The Belgians and German Racialism

²³⁹ The Nazi paper of record.

²⁴⁰“Bulletin de renseignements no. 419,” February 13, 1933, p. 1, in AMBAE 11179, *farde* 1933; de Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, February 15, 1933, in AMBAE 11179. Please see the next chapter for a greater discussion of the defense of the Belgian frontier; “Note,” AMBAE 11185/1; Schmit to Minister of National Defense, Berlin, February 17, 1935, p. 2, in MRA-BAFM 29 (185-2-46), doc.# 74.

²⁴¹ de Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, November 7, 1932, p. 2, in AMBAE 11.183/2 “1928-1938” 1932; F. Du Chastel, “Note sur la situation particuliere de la Belgique vis-à-vis de l’Allemagne,” p. 4, in AMBAE 11179, *farde* 1933; Schmit to Minister of National Defense, Berlin, January 31, 1935, pp. 1, 2, in MRA-BAFM 29 (185-2-46), docs. # 123-4; Schmit to Minister of National Defense, Berlin, October 4, 1935, p. 1, in MRA-BAFM 29 (185-2-49), doc.# 233.

One of the most alarming features of the new *Reich*, especially given Germany's *Flamenpolitik* during the Great War, was the racialist aspect of Nazi ideology. On May 22, 1933, Ambassador de Kerchove warned Foreign Minister Hymans about the resurgence in Germany of "*Deutschtum*," the gathering of Germanic populations into the *Reich*. "[T]his change of orientation, which still only fades, offers for Belgium a danger infinitely greater than that of a Germany hostile and decided to retake, by mutual agreement or by force, the lost territories." Henceforth, Germany would not limit itself to lands that had been German before 1918 but would seek to expand wherever there were "Germanics." He notes that the "Hitlerian" government would shift its attention from governments to "political, economic, or cultural movements of inhabitants of Germanic race." For example, the German pressure for the return of Eupen-Malmédy had eased but Germany was now increasingly supporting the Flemish separatists. Two months later, he reported that

It is interesting to note in this regard that the Parliamentary Republic limited itself to demanding the restitution of Eupen-Malmédy with the tenacity and the aggressiveness that you know. The extension of the "German zone" to the environs of Arlon and to a part of our Luxembourg must indicate clearly to us that the political situation has completely changed and that from now on, as I have had the honor of bringing to your attention on several occasions, Hitlerian *Deutschtum* will extend itself to all the lands peopled by Germanic racial elements and not only to the restitution to the Motherland of the territories taken away from Germany politically by the Treaty of Versailles.²⁴²

Among the evidence of "Germanism" presented by Belgian diplomats was a May 6, 1933 article in the *Politisches Tageblatt* of Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle) in which the author praised a Flemish gymnastic organization for coming to the support of their German colleagues beset by "foreign propaganda against Germanism." The letter of

²⁴² de Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, May 22, 1933, pp. 1-3, in AMBAE 11179 1933; de Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, July 22, 1933, p. 3, in AMBAE 11179.

support was quoted. In the letter the Flemish gymnasts declared their rejection of the “legends of horrors and atrocities of Germany” and reported that they themselves had been abused by the Walloons in power. “And if the Belgian press today solicits the aid of Flanders to make agitation against Germany, it will obtain nothing. To the contrary, Flanders struggles as much as possible for the prestige of its German friends.” However, the Belgian diplomats were sanguine about the loyalty of the Flemish. A *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*²⁴³ article on the Belgian Commission on Foreign Affairs reported, *à propos* a report by the leading Flemish activist politician van Cauwelaert, that “the men of the new Germany, who counted on the sympathy of the Flemings, will experience a disillusionment even greater in that M. van Cauwelaert, in his quality as a Fleming, is more apt than a Walloon to understand the German mentality.” The German perception of Flemish attitudes was shaped by the selective attention given to Flemish opinion. *Het Nieuws van den Dag*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, and *De Standaard*, the leading Flemish-language papers were ignored in favor of *De Schelde*, the Frontist publication.²⁴⁴

J. Belgium and the Allies before the Remilitarization of the Rhineland

As we have seen, Belgian foreign policy before the remilitarization of the Rhineland was based on the idea of collective security. An important aspect of this policy was the desire for a rapprochement between France and Great Britain because Belgium needed both countries’ support to have a chance of surviving the next war against

²⁴³ An important Swiss newspaper of Zurich provenance.

²⁴⁴“The Flemings and Germanism,” *Politisches Tageblatt d’Aix la-Chapelle*, nr. 209/356 of May 6, 1933, annex to M. Ed. D’Argent [Belgian Consul in Aachen/Aix la-Chapelle] to Hymans, Berlin, May 6, 1933, AMBAE 11179, doc.# 2460. The German original was translated into French; M. J. Le Jeune de Munsbach [Belgian minister in Berne] to Hymans, Berne, May 2, 1933; de Kerchove to Hymans, Berlin, May 22, 1933, p. 3, in AMBAE 11179 1933.

Germany. A January 1934 note by Fernand Van Langenhove²⁴⁵ declared that “the safeguard of our independence commands us to avoid being drawn into a conflict with Germany where we do not dispose at the same time of the support of England and of France: there is one of the guiding lines of our policy.” Unfortunately, agreements between the British and French were few and far-between. As historian Roger Keyes notes in his discussion of the reorientation towards neutrality, a major factor in this reorientation was the constant bickering between Belgium’s two putative protectors. The British were encouraging German rearmament and at the same time trying to weaken French defense.²⁴⁶

The Belgians had been bitterly disappointed by the lack of French support for their claims at the Versailles peace conference. Moreover, “the French [were, in the opinion of Belgian diplomats,] so often apt to be haughty and disdainful in their conduct of diplomacy.” And while the Belgians tried to take French concerns into consideration, the French did not extend the same courtesy to the Belgians. Louis Wodon, the head of the cabinet of King Leopold III, complained that “the discourse which [French Foreign Minister] Flandin pronounced Sunday accentuates the maladroit character of France’s current international policy. . . . [It] will augment in our case the impression of mistrust that currently persists with regard to France.” Later, Belgian Prime Minister Hubert Pierlot would complain about “the unsatisfactory attitude of the French General Staff during the period of the Franco-Belgian military agreement [1920-1936].”²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ The secretary general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “he had the qualities required to succeed in diplomacy: perspicacity, wisdom, moderation, patience. Of sure judgment, he was of good counsel.” Paul-Henri Spaak, quoted in Michel Dumoulin, *Spaak*, 2 ed. (Brussels: Racine, 1999), p. 72.

²⁴⁶ F. Van Langenhove, untitled document dated January 9, 1934, in AMBAE 11185/3, “Defense Militaire Belge”; Keyes, p. 45.

²⁴⁷ Paul-Henri Spaak, *The Continuing Battle: Memoirs of a European 1936-1966*, translated from *Combats Inachevés* by Ray Steding, et al. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), pp. 10, 9; David Owen Kieft, *Belgium’s*

As mentioned above, the French were increasingly unwilling to act alone to keep Germany in line. French ambassador Claudel informed Foreign Minister Hymans that the French rejected any use of force to chastise the Germans for their violations of the Versailles Treaty, while in 1935 the Baron de Gaiffier complained that “France pursues a chimera” by trying to get the Germans to accept the idea of a mutual assistance pact for Eastern Europe, where Germany had many territorial claims. He asserted that Germany needed to be watched and its violations of Versailles punished. “This surveillance should have been exercised at the moment when the Allies still occupied the Rhineland. After several timid protestations, France has adopted the law of least effort, has closed its eyes to the infractions of the treaty and has not even dared to urge the application of article 212 of this treaty.”²⁴⁸

As we have seen, after the Belgians and French evacuated the Rhineland, the Belgians began increasingly to consider the 1920 military agreement an albatross around their necks, for both diplomatic and internal reasons. Indeed, in 1934, the Belgian foreign minister did not even consider the Pact as binding on Belgium or France. The arrangements of the pact were established for the period, now ended, when the Franco-Belgian forces were on the left bank of the Rhine. The part of the pact in which the French took responsibility for the defense of the Belgian coast became particularly problematic because “nothing could more awaken the mistrust of England than the fact of giving to France the defense of our coasts; nothing could at the same time more gravely

Return to Neutrality: An Essay in the Frustrations of Small-Power Diplomacy (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), p. 15; Louis Wodon, *Note au Roi, 31 March [1936?]*, Royal Archives, Section XV/1; Telegram from Sir Robert Clive to Lord Halifax, Brussels, May 19, 1939, MRA-AMB 80 folder 4, page 68; see also: report of conversation between Colonel Blake, Mr. Strang, and [signature illegible], *Ibid.*, p. 185.

²⁴⁸ Conversation of Hymans with M. Claudel, DDB III: 236; “Tour d’horizon,” Gaiffier to Hymans, Paris, March 12, 1935, in ARP-GVO 4 1935A.

affect the efficacy of the Rhenish Pact.” In 1936, the potential impact of the treaty was even graver because it threatened the passage of the military bill, which will be discussed in the next chapter, needed to reinforce the Belgian army in an increasingly threatening international climate. On February 26, 1936, Fernand Van Langenhove informed French foreign ministry officials of the danger that the bill could be defeated. “A violent campaign is led against the accord; public demonstrations will take place. The movement has above all spread among the catholic Flemings. But the attitude of the latter conditions that of the socialists. Even today, the military project has received in sections of the Chamber only 62 votes against 94 negative votes and 16 abstentions.” The same day, Count de Kerchove, now in Paris, noted “The dominant preoccupation of the King’s Government is, for one part, to assure the vote of the military law, for the other part, to maintain intact the principle and the practice of the contacts existing between the general staffs of the two countries.”²⁴⁹

The French themselves recognized the accord had become a liability. General Riedinger, the French military attaché, pointed out that it had never been used as a “generator of obligations” in any of the meetings between the ministers, staffs, or military attachés, while it was causing demonstrations, as much anti-French as anti-Belgian Government, in Flanders. As well, the Locarno Pact was superior and equally binding. He recommended that the accord be denounced. However, the French foreign minister was reluctant to permit the accord to die. He preferred a common declaration that the accord did not exceed the Locarno obligations. After a month of haggling, letters

²⁴⁹“Entrevue entre MM. Jaspar et Deveze,” November 11, 1934, p. 4, in AMBAE 11185/1; F. Van Langenhove, January 9, 1934, p.1; “Entretien au Quai d’Orsay, relative à l’accord militaire franco-belge,” February 26, 1936, DDB III: 482; Annex to Kerchove to van Zeeland [prime minister and foreign minister], Paris, February 26, 1936, DDB III: 479.

acknowledging the demise of the accord, *with the exception of joint staff talks*, were exchanged on March 6, 1936. An April 1936 letter from Prime Minister van Zeeland stressed this point to Minister of National Defense Devèze. “I feel that the letters exchanged on March 6 mark the will of the two governments to establish a permanent contact between the two general staffs. It is thus important that this contact be realized without delay.”²⁵⁰

One French military matter in which the Belgians took a keen interest was the fortification of France’s northern frontier abutting Belgium. In 1933, in response to news reports about the French Senatorial Army Commission’s discussion about the matter, Foreign Minister Hymans instructed Ambassador de Gaiffier to “encourage the French government on this track.” De Gaiffier spoke to Generalissimo Gamelin about the matter and the latter informed him the French defense of the frontier would be linked to the Belgian defense of the Scheldt. On March 27, 1934, de Gaiffier reported speaking to French politicians and generals, including among the latter Generalissimos Weygand and Gamelin, about Belgium’s desire to see these fortifications created. “‘France,’ I said, ‘cannot count on the . . . breasts of Belgian soldiers to protect it against a German aggression. The Reich must be made to understand that the Belgian frontier is no longer the weakest point of resistance in order to remove from it the temptation to recommence the maneuver of 1914.’” “You must”— the German ambassador to France told his Belgian counterpart “in a fit of frankness,” “make representations to France on the subject of its defensive system. It bristles with [the Maginot Line] and thus renders obligatory to Germany, in the case of a new conflict with France, passage by Belgium.”

²⁵⁰General Riedinger, quoted in Devèze to van Zeeland, January 17, 1936, DDB III, p. 451; “Conversation de M. van Zeeland, Premier Ministre, avec M. Flandin, [French] Ministre des Affaires Étrangères,” Paris, February 15, 1936, Ibid., pp. 456-460; van Zeeland to Devèze, April ?, 1936, in AMBAE 11185/1.

Unfortunately, for various reasons, including the expense, the unsuitability of the terrain in French Flanders, and the presence of the major French industrial city of Lille, these fortifications remained incomplete. For their part, the French occasionally floated the idea of the Belgians fortifying the Arlon region in the Ardennes and they even offered to help pay for it. However, Foreign Minister Hymans rejected the French suggestion, sending a coded telegram warning Ambassador de Gaiffier to avoid any official *demarche* because the question had to be considered free from foreign influence. Hymans rejected French offers of financial aid for the project because that would have represented a loss of national sovereignty.²⁵¹

The Belgians were also very concerned about being driven, through the Covenant of the League of Nations, Locarno, or a proposed Europe-wide mutual assistance treaty, into a war for French interests. We have seen in the previous chapter that many disparate groups in Belgium rejected military spending lest the army created be used for foreign purposes. As General Émile Galet complained to Colonel van Overstraeten, “Belgium is the only small country in Western Europe having such an engagement of mutual assistance to the profit of great countries like France and Germany. Belgian public opinion will never accept this defiance of good sense: to accept engagements of mutual assistance to the profit of the states of Eastern Europe. . . .” The next year, Belgian

²⁵¹ Hymans to de Gaiffier, November 3, 1933, in AMBAE 11.096, *sous-farde* “Defense Militaire Belge,” doc.# 19; Handwritten note by Hymans, November 20, 1933, DDB III: 243; de Gaiffier to Hymans, Paris, March 27, 1934, p. 3, in AMBAE 11185/3, *sous-farde* “1934”; German ambassador quoted in de Gaiffier to Hymans, Paris?, November 6, 1933, p. 1, in AMBAE 11.096, *sous-farde* “Defense Militaire Belge,” doc.# 18; de Kerchove to [Belgian Foreign Minister] Spaak, Paris, November 3, 1936, p. 1, AMBAE 11096 “Defense Militaire Belge”; in 1933, the Belgian military attaché in Paris noted the cost of the northern fortifications could run over one billion Francs while proposed spending reached only 300 million. General Du Bois to Minister of National Defense, personal and secret letter dated December 21, 1933, in AMBAE 11.096, “Defense Militaire Belge” doc.# 9; J.E. Kaufmann and R.M. Jurga, *Fortress Europe: European Fortifications of World War II* (Conshohocken, PA: Combined, 1999), pp. 14-15; Hymans, coded telegram to Gaiffier, Telegramme A Chiffre no. 239, in AMBAE 11.096, “Defense Militaire Belge” doc.# 14; Document dated March 24, 1934, signed by Hymans, in AMBAE 11185/3, *sous-farde* 1934.

Minister Jaspar explained to a French audience that the Belgians could be relied upon to defend Belgium, but not to defend Poland. A mirror concern was the French army entering Belgium without prior Belgian approval. The documents teem with expressions of this and, generally, with the exception of certain ill-considered statements by Henri Pétain, with French reassurances on the matter. General Gamelin informed Baron de Gaiffier in November 1933 that “‘we will send young [i.e. better] troops; this sending being, of course, subordinated to your appeal.’ The General insisted strongly on this last condition, from which I conclude that the headquarters, like the Quai d’Orsay, has been filled in on my meeting with Marshal Pétain.” In May 1936, Fernand Van Langenhove made clear to the minister of national defense that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was responsible for deciding when to appeal for French aid and that a 1934 French note said clearly that French troops would only enter after the Belgians gave them permission to do so.²⁵²

The British took a soft line on Germany. In 1930, the British, reluctant to raise tensions, persuaded the French and Belgians not to complain to the League of Nations or the Conciliation Committee when 100,000 *Stahlhelms*²⁵³ demonstrated in Aachen to celebrate the departure of the French and Belgian forces even though this demonstration was in contravention of Versailles article 42. In February 1933, after the Prussian Interior Minister raised additional volunteer assistant police in violation of article 162 and of article 42, the British, not wanting to threaten the disarmament conference, urged

²⁵² Galet to van Overstraeten, Geneva, February 14, 1933, in ARP-GVO 1930-1934; de Kerchove to van Zeeland, Paris, April 24, 1936, p. 3, in AMBAE 11185/1, doc. # 2686; de Gaiffier to Hymans, Paris, November 20, 1933, p. 2, in AMBAE 11185/3; see also Gaiffier to Hymans, Paris, January 13, 1933, in AMBAE 11185/3, “Defense Militaire Belge/Reactions à l’étranger 1929-36”, *sous-farde* “Defense Militaire Belge”, doc. # 249; Van Langenhove, “Entretien avec le ministre de la defense nationale, le 5 mai 1936,” p. 2, in AMBAE 11185/1 “Politique Militaire.”

²⁵³ A rightist German veterans’s organization. Craig, p. 485.

restraint. That October, Baron de Gaiffier suggested a policy of “intimidation” aimed at keeping Germany in line, but the British were not interested. “For four months the Cabinet in London has been kept, minutely, current on Germany’s military activity, it knows that this activity currently bears on aviation and that every day thirty planes leave the factories. However, it closes its eyes to this manifest violation of the Treaty and refuses to raise a protest.” The British ambassador to France noted similarities between current German behavior and that of Wilhelmine Germany before the Great War. “I was struck. . . to note in France, as in England, the same naivety, the same ability to let themselves be duped. . . . At bottom, British public opinion. . . witnesses, for the moment, with a stupefying indifference, the rearmament of Germany.” One reason for this timidity was the manifest impredation for war of the Allied powers, especially Britain, whose military had been allowed to decline since Locarno, and which, at least in terms of that pact, could not count on its Dominions. By 1935, the British already reckoned the *Reichswehr* superior to the French or Soviet armies.²⁵⁴

Notwithstanding British unreadiness, Belgium looked to Britain for protection, recalling that the clear British declaration in support of Belgian neutrality had kept the latter out of the Franco-Prussian War. The Belgians also felt that had the British made a comparable declaration in 1914 the Germans would not have invaded. In July 1933, Foreign Minister Hymans told British diplomat Sir John Simon of Belgian concerns and of the capital importance the Belgians placed on British aid in case of war.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁴ “Contravention aux articles 42 et 43 du traite de Versailles,” in AMBAE 11179, *sous-farde* 1933; de Gaiffier to Hymans, Paris, October 20, 1933, DDB III:206; Lord Tyrrell, quoted in de Gaiffier to Hymans, Paris, December 20, 1933, DDB III: 275-6; Cartier to Hymans, London, March 6, 1934, DDB III: 329; de Gaiffier to Hymans, Paris, April 15, 1935, in ARP-GVO 4 1935A.

²⁵⁵ Hymans to Cartier, February 17, 1933, DDB III: 53; Cartier to Hymans, London, March 6, 1934, DDB III: 329; “Conversation avec Sir John Simon au Foreign Office,” July 10, 1933, p. 3, in AMBAE 11179

This concern was reciprocal. Foreign Minister Hymans observed that “the impression radiating from the meetings in London is that Belgian security is a problem posed before the British Government and become the object of its preoccupations.” The British Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, declared in late 1934 that because of the improvements in military aviation “England’s frontiers are found no longer at Dover but rather on the Rhine.” This declaration fit into Belgian conceptions of the importance of air power in determining battles.²⁵⁶

The Belgians still hoped to reach a military accord with the British analogous to the one with France and Paul Hymans suggested it during his 1934 trip to London. The problems with the Franco-Belgian pact would be avoided here because of the generally high esteem in which Britain was held by all sectors of Belgian society. Hymans told three British cabinet ministers that one of the best ways to avoid a freely rearming Germany and a new arms race possibly leading to a new war was for Britain to use Belgium as a “barrier” and make a military accord with Belgium similar to the one with France. This plea was without consequence and the Belgian ambassador had recommended against suggesting it because the attitude of the British government was known to be negative, opining that the best the Belgians could hope for was a clear declaration of British support.²⁵⁷

K. The Reoccupation of the Rhineland

As they would do sixty-three years later with the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the Germans took a step on March 7, 1936 that would change Europe and, eventually, the

²⁵⁶ “La mission de M. Hymans à Londres”, Brussels, May 23, 1934, DDB III: 376; Stanley Baldwin cited in Cartier to Jaspar, London, October 5, 1934, DDB III: 404-5.

²⁵⁷ “La mission de M. Hymans à Londres”, Brussels, May 23, 1934, DDB III: 368-70, 376; Cartier to Hymans, London, March 6, 1934, DDB III: 329.

world—they sent troops into the Rhineland. This step, met with inaction by the Locarno powers, changed the power calculus of the continent, directly threatening Belgium and France and beginning the ascendancy of Adolf Hitler over his generals that would continue through the Munich Pact and end in World War II. “Hitler, who had acted against the counsel of his military advisors, was now all the more confident that he could assume even greater risks, disregard cautious advice, and triumph by bluff until he could conquer by force.” It would also be the foreign policy trigger leading to the Belgian policy of “free hands” or “independence.” The Belgians had long been concerned with such a German remilitarization and kept a watch on the area. On May 24, 1935, in response to rumors in the foreign press that the Germans planned to send in soldiers, General Schmit reported he could not find evidence of regular German troops in the Rhineland although the paramilitary forces were well represented. In December, Count de Kerchove reported that rumors that France would abandon the demilitarized zone in exchange for an arms limitation pact or even an air pact were not true. “France is firmly decided to admit no modifications of the regime definitively ordered by the Locarno accords on the subject of the Rhenish demilitarized zone.” He always emphasized the importance of keeping Locarno and the Rhenish Pact inviolable. He made that clear when he served in Berlin and one of his contacts, Ministerial Director Köpke, had been able to convince Hitler and the OKW (the German high command) not to invade when many had urged him to. Indeed, at the beginning of the new year of 1936, rumors of a coming remilitarization were discounted by General Schmit because he felt the German military leaders would not risk their unprepared army. However, on February 20, 1936, the Quai d’Orsay warned of an imminent remilitarization of the Rhineland and asked about the

Belgian attitude. Prime Minister van Zeeland answered that Belgium would continue staff talks.²⁵⁸

Small German units entered the Rhineland on March 7, citing French ratification of their treaty with the Soviet Union as a violation of Locarno and that therefore Germany was no longer bound by that pact. Hitler had chosen to act on a Saturday because it would retard any Allied reaction. The move took the Berlin diplomatic corps by surprise. “Neither Sir Eric Phipps [British ambassador], nor M. François-Poncet [French ambassador], nor myself predicted, because of the information that we had, that German troops were going to enter into the demilitarized zone: we were all three fooled on this subject.” The important question was what the other powers were going to do beyond referring the question to the League of Nations. The Belgian ambassador to France warned his British counterpart of the danger in which Belgium would be if her protectors failed to react. Belgium would have only the alternative of reaching military agreements with England and France. “‘Do you believe,’ responded the English ambassador, ‘that England would be ready to subscribe to that engagement?’”²⁵⁹

Gerhard Weinberg assesses that British Foreign Minister Sir Anthony Eden “‘immediately reacted as the Germans had hoped by trying to restrain the French. . . . As the British Foreign Office informed the American chargé d’affaires, ‘England would make every endeavour to prevent the imposition of military and/or economic sanctions against Germany.’” The French restricted themselves to defensive measures; sending

²⁵⁸ Weinberg, I: 262; “Bulletin de Renseignements no. 764”, Schmit to Minister of National Defense, May 24, 1935, in MRA-BAFM 29 (185-2-47); Kerchove to Van Zeeland, Paris, December 19, 1935, DDB III: 449; *Ibid.*, p. 450; van Overstraeten, diary entry for January 24, 1936, pp. 197-8; *Ibid.*, diary entry for February 20, 1936, pp. 200-1.

²⁵⁹ Weinberg, I: 251-2; Graeffe [Belgian chargé d’affaires in Berlin] to van Zeeland, Berlin, March 7, 1936; van Zeeland to Belgian embassies in Paris, London, Rome, March 8, 1936, DDB 4:122; *aide mémoire* dated Paris, March 9, 1936, attached to Kerchove to van Zeeland, Paris, March 10, 1936, DDB IV: 128.

active fortress units into their emplacements and digging more defensive works. Other active units near the frontier not requiring rail transportation were alerted and deployed. However, no reservists were called up. Weinberg observes that the French were fully capable of acting vigorously if they had wanted to and if the French military had planned for such an eventuality. “The political factor of an election two months off, a public fearful of war and willing to fight only in defense of France’s own frontiers, and a military program that contained no plan whatsoever for any relevant countermove combined to force a diplomatic rather than a military rejoinder to Germany.” In fact, French Foreign Minister Flandin approached the other Locarno signatories on March 9, when he proposed to remind the Powers of their duties under the Pact. He offered “the entirety of [France’s] land, sea, and air forces” to react to the remilitarization and threatened to act unilaterally, destroying the system of collective security, if the other Powers did not follow. The ambassadors of the Locarno powers (except Germany) met again on March 10, at the Quai d’Orsay. M. Flandin repeated his offer to give France’s forces to the cause of the League of Nations “to repress what it considers as an assassination attempt on international peace” and his hope that the Powers would do their duty. The French rejected any negotiations until international law had been restored; that is, until the Germans withdrew from the Rhineland. The response of Belgian Foreign and Prime Minister van Zeeland was that a united front was necessary, that Belgium would whole-heartedly take part in any action taken by the Locarno signatories, and that he hoped the other Powers would let him know what they were going to do. This was something less than the unequivocal support of France’s proposed strong reaction the situation demanded. As seen above, British Foreign Minister Eden raised anew the

question of negotiations. Prime Minister van Zeeland clarified Belgium's position to the British ambassador: "I estimate that the solidarity between France and England is indispensable. Consequently, on all the points where France and England are in agreement, I am in agreement with them in advance. When this accord does not exist, I estimate it my duty to slide myself between them to bring their points of view closer."²⁶⁰

Without agreement, there was no chance of success for any policy. When the meeting resumed, van Zeeland rejected the idea of going to war to preserve the demilitarized zone, proposing instead "an attitude at the same time firm and conciliating [?!]" in which there would be a threat of military sanctions by the Locarno Powers and economic sanctions by the League of Nations. He counseled against putting Hitler in a position in which he had to either go to war or lose power. The meeting broke up without an agreement as Foreign Minister Eden announced he had to go back to London for more instructions. The disappointed French rebuked Belgium for not taking a harder line on Germany's remilitarization, arguing that if Belgium had reacted more like France, "English public opinion would understand the necessity of putting itself in unison with us."²⁶¹

The Powers met in London on March 14. Van Zeeland declared that Belgium had suffered the most from the German action because it meant the end of Locarno, one of the keystones of Belgium's international status. The Belgians joined the British in rejecting the French demands for sanctions against Germany. There was support for

²⁶⁰²⁶⁰Weinberg, I: 254; Gamelin cited in Kerchove to van Zeeland, Paris, March 8, 1936; Weinberg, *Ibid.*; *aide mémoire* dated Paris, March 9, 1936, attached to Kerchove to van Zeeland, Paris, March 10, 1936, DDB IV: 1, 25-6; *Ibid.*, p. 128; "Compte rendu résumé de la reunion qui a eu lieu au Quai d'Orsay, le 10 mars 1936," DDB IV: 132-138.

Conversation between van Zeeland and Sir George Clerk, March 10, 1936, DDB IV:139; "Compte rendu de la réunion des quatre Puissances locarniennes (suite)", DDB 4:139-140; Kerchove to van Zeeland, Paris, March 14, 1936, DDB IV: 147-8.

negotiations of a new Locarno, involving Italy and Germany. On March 19, the Locarno Powers reached an agreement in which Belgium, Britain, and France agreed to aid each other in the event of an unprovoked German attack while they were negotiating with Germany over its last unprovoked action. On March 23, Ambassador Kerchove reported to Brussels that M. Bargeton, a French diplomat, suggested that any negotiations with Germany would end with concessions by the Locarno Powers. Kerchove noted from Paris that “the attitude of Belgium, and especially the preponderant part that the Prime Minister. . . took in the discussions and deliberations, are the object of unanimous praise. . . .” Meanwhile, the League of Nations achieved not much. On March 19, the Council of the League adopted a resolution branding Germany’s action a violation of Versailles and Locarno.²⁶²

In retrospect, this inability of the Locarno Powers to act in self-defense, in their own best interests is staggering. How could the Powers, which had recently suffered the bloodiest war to date, against Germany, have allowed it to rearm? How could they have allowed one violation after another of the treaties created to keep Germany under control? How could the British have possibly believed the solution to Germany’s *repeated* violations was negotiating another treaty with it? How could the French, with the most powerful army in Europe, not have gone in? One explanation was suggested at the time by a French writer in the influential Parisian daily *Le Figaro*: “The tragic difference which exists between France and Germany is that the latter uses the language of a boxer and we respond to it with the language of a notary.” The French, lacking the benefit of hindsight, were against a new war, especially because they did not feel themselves in any immediate danger. Kerchove reported “the ruling Parisian milieu are

²⁶²Miller, p. 222-3; Keyes, p. 54; Kerchove to van Zeeland, Paris, March 23, 1936, DDB 4: 153.

convinced that no bellicose German reaction should be envisaged. Such is, equally, the opinion of the military milieu where it is estimated that the ‘Wehrmacht’ is not yet ready to undertake an offensive war.” Historian of France Gordon Wright points out the French who argued at the time that they should have acted unilaterally. Even more Frenchmen argued the same in retrospect. French action would have forced the British to act in their support and would have called the German bluff. However, in the face of the antipathy of the French and British publics to a new war, “[i]t would have required a really unified and courageous cabinet to move in the face of the public mood and at a time of serious division in [France]. Besides, it is by no means certain that the use of force would have brought quick success.”²⁶³

The military staff talks between the French and Belgians, a survivor of the denunciation of the military pact, and intended to deal with a German remilitarization of the Rhineland, began on April 15 after it was made clear that this did not entail an alliance. As early as October 1934, French Generalissimo Weygand had recommended to Ambassador de Gaiffier “technical conversations, between the Belgian and French general staffs, on the subject of measures to take in common in case of German aggression.” The Belgian government examined the issue and had no problems with such conversations, as long as they remained technical and not diplomatic. In the wake of the events of March 7 and subsequent negotiations, the French proposed talks with the Belgians and sent a questionnaire in which the Belgians were asked to commit themselves “to fix the moment or the circumstances in which we would appeal to the French guarantee.” Pierre van Zuylen ruled that the French would be told the Belgians

²⁶³ Wladimir Ormesson, quoted in Kerchove to van Zeeland, Paris, March 23, 1936, DDB 4: 153; *ibid.*; *ibid.*, p. 154; Wright, p. 373.

intended to be faithful to their new obligations of March 19 and would decide when to ask for help after discussing the issue with their guarantors. That understood, there would be no problem with talks, as long as there were no commitments. These talks were expanded to include the British. On April 30, British admiral Sir W. James read his opening speech in which he differentiated between specific issues, in which case the talks would be specific and detailed, and “hypothetical issue[s],” in which case the talks would be “more general.”

It is under these latter conditions that we meet today, and our conversations will be circumscribed by the limit set by our respective Governments, that is to say that they can only go as far as is implicit in our existing obligations, under the Locarno Treaty, to come to the assistance of your countries in the event of an unprovoked act of aggression by reason of the crossing of the frontier by German forces.²⁶⁴

It is interesting to note that the definition of “an unprovoked act of aggression” was changed by the lack of an Allied response to the German remilitarization. Previously, Germany sending troops into the Rhineland would have constituted “an unprovoked act of aggression.” In the Allied desperation not to challenge the Germans they altered the definition. After the speech, the discussions started in earnest. The British refused to promise an expeditionary force, which would only be a miniscule two divisions if it *were* sent; and then only between twenty and thirty days after the beginning of the war. The French suggested the force be used in Belgium, which delighted the Belgians, but the British would not commit. They also brushed off Belgian inquiries as to British arms assistance should the Belgian arms works, which were in the east of the country, be overrun. The British said that was beyond the scope of the talks. The British did promise

²⁶⁴ Miller, p. 222; Jaspar to Gaiffier, November 13, 1934, AMBAE 11185/1, doc.# 9108; “Note pour Monsieur le Ministre”, April 1936, pp. 1-3 in AMBAE 11.096; Attachment to Major-General Deffontaine to Baron van Zuylen, Brussels, April 30, 1936, in Ibid. This document is in English.

to stay in touch via the military attachés. That was it. The Belgian Foreign Ministry complained that “the contacts between British, Belgian, and French general staffs have not given the results which we had a right to expect, following the arrangements which took place in London last March 19. . . . *No technical question has been regulated in London* [emphasis in the original]” The explanation given was British opposition to a military accord and British dislike of France.²⁶⁵

The London talks were, as planned in advance by the French who argued that the limited and delayed British force proposed made Franco-Belgian coordination more important, followed in mid-May by Franco-Belgian talks. These conversations will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. They were much more successful than the tripartite ones as the French “furnish[ed] us precisions on the subjects of the reinforcements which will be furnished in the very first days of the war. [However,] they give us no indications of the forces which would be sent into Belgium after the tenth day. . . . It is important consequently to realize what can be expected of contacts between general staffs; their advantages are limited.” The Belgians were still disappointed they could not get more out of the British. Ambassador Cartier even proposed secret talks with the British, excluding the French to get around the British animosity towards the latter. In fact, Belgian animosity against the French complicated matters because the Belgian Chamber would not tolerate close Belgo-French “collaboration” without British involvement and since the Chamber had not yet passed the military bill, the Government had to accede to its wishes. Van Zeeland appealed to Sir Anthony Eden in Geneva in

²⁶⁵ David Owen Kieft, *Belgium's return to Neutrality: an essay in the frustrations of small power diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972), p. 72; “Note pour Monsieur le Ministre,” Geneva, May 11, 1936, in AMBAE 11185/1.

May but Eden put him off. Then events passed by potential Anglo-Belgian cooperation.²⁶⁶

L. "Independence"

Belgium had begun to rethink its policy of relying on collective security in the face of the events of the mid-1930s. The Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 alarmed Belgium both because Belgium relied on an Anglo-French-Italian entente to protect it from Germany and because the ineffective sanctions highlighted the inefficacy of the League of Nations. German rearmament and, especially, the remilitarization of the Rhineland, bringing the German army to Belgium's door, alarmed the Belgians at the same time they showed that Britain and France were not to be relied upon to protect the country. That April, Fernand Van Langenhove wrote a note examining "the new status destined to guarantee the security of Belgium." He posited that "one dominant consideration must remain present in spirit: war signifies for Belgium mortal peril, devastation of its territory, risk of its existence, or at least of its colonial empire." His three suggestions for Belgian policy were "a) avoid war breaking out on our frontiers; b) if it takes place in our proximity, to avoid being drawn into it; c) if we are, despite all, involved in it, to assure an immediate and efficacious assistance on the part of the neighboring states interested in the defense of our territory. . . ." In order to achieve a) it was necessary to build up the Belgian military to deter any aggressor looking for a quick and easy way to use Belgian territory. In order to achieve b) and give full effect to a), it was necessary to "practice *an entirely independent policy, cleared of any exclusive tie.*

²⁶⁶ Kieft, pp. 72-3; Cartier to van Zeeland, London, May 7, 1936, pp. 2-3, in AMBAE 11185/1; "Contacts entre etats-majors" May 20, 1936, in AMBAE 11185/1; Kieft, pp. 75-7.

[my emphasis]” Even c) must be contingent on avoiding alliances which increased the risk of being drawn into a war.

It is in drawing inspiration from the preceding considerations that it is necessary to determine the engagements that Belgium would assume on its side. A small country, dealing with Great Powers, must show itself prudent. Its obligations must be limited to that which is strictly indispensable. It is desirable that it conserves up to the last moment its liberty of decision; if it takes up arms, it must be evident that it is only for the defense of the country. On that depends the unanimous *élan* of the country, such as it occurred in 1914, and the maintenance of national unity.²⁶⁷

This is an excellent statement of the rationale for the Belgian policy of “independence.” The success of the military bill necessary to create an army capable of dissuading any potential invader was dependent on the support of the Belgian people, who were adamantly opposed to building up an army that could be used to serve foreign purposes. This same national unity, which was necessary for Belgium to survive and triumph in a war, could only be guaranteed if it were clear war had been forced on the country; it had not been drawn on as a result of any Belgian alliances.

On July 20, 1936, Paul-Henri Spaak²⁶⁸, who would go on to become, perhaps, the most famous Belgian ever, made one of his signal speeches as foreign minister. In that speech, he declared “I want the foreign policy of Belgium to be placed firmly under the sign of realism. . . . I want only one thing: a foreign policy which is exclusively and

²⁶⁷ Fernand Van Langenhove, “Note sur le Nouveau Statut Destine a Garantir la Securite de la Belgique,” pp. 2-5, in ARP XV/1.

²⁶⁸ Paul Charles Henri Spaak was born in Schaerbeek in 1899, descendant of politicians, arrested by the Germans trying to escape occupied Belgium to join the Belgian army in 1916, doctor of law in 1921, member of the Belgian socialist party, the *Parti Ouvrier Belge*, elected deputy to the Chamber in October 1932, minister of transport in March 1935, foreign minister in June 1936, he would go on to become prime minister in May 1938, lose that job in February 1939, become foreign minister again on September 3, 1939, and hold that position through the Phony War, the Eighteen Days campaign, and the government-in exile. After the war, he became prime minister again in 1946 and 1947-9. He served as foreign minister until 1949, and then again from 1954 to 1957 and 1961 to 1969 while he was also vice premier. He was also the first president of the General Assembly of the United Nations, chairman of the Council for European Recovery, and secretary general of NATO. He died in 1972. Dumoulin, pp. 13, 21, 25, 41, 69, 133; *New Columbia Encyclopedia*, s.v. Spaak, Paul Henri.

wholly Belgian.” In other words, he was rejecting a policy of alliances and foreign influences. The speech delighted the Rexists, the Flemings, who were happy to be “*los van Frankrijk*,” and the Walloons, who were wary of being drawn into a war for foreign interests in Eastern Europe. His own Socialist party, however, felt he was betraying collective security. Meanwhile, Belgium was attempting to avoid such complications during negotiations for a new Locarno Pact. On September 16, 1936, Pierre van Zuylen warned that “*the maximum of our effort must be to assure the protection of [our] territory. . . . Our material forces do not permit us to do more* [emphasis in the original].” Moreover, given the pro-French loyalties of the Walloons and the anti-French feelings of the Flemings, Belgium could not side with either France or Germany without ripping the country apart. He warned that to become guarantor, as was the case with the original Locarno, when the situation was much more favorable and the German army was not yet in the Rhineland, would inevitably lead to a disastrous war. He saw no advantages to becoming a guarantor. He recommended a policy of independence but did make clear that such a policy of independence did not exclude staff talks or even accords. A further advantage of the policy was to bring Belgium closer to Holland, which was following a neutral/independent policy.²⁶⁹

On October 14, 1936, King Leopold III made a speech to the Cabinet during discussions on the defense bill. This speech perfectly captured the “desires, fears, and hopes of his subjects [and] became the official statement of Belgian foreign policy, accepted as such both at home and abroad.” It was publicized following the desire of the cabinet ministers. Leopold noted there were several reasons for building up the Belgian military: the rearmament of Germany, and militarization of Italy and Russia was forcing

²⁶⁹ Kieft, pp. 110-111; Kieft, *ibid.*; van Zuylen, “La Revision des Accords de Locarno, pp. 5-8, 10.

other countries, including “deliberately pacific [nations] like Switzerland and the Netherlands,” to build up their forces; advances in air power and motorization made the opening phases of a war more dangerous, especially in the case of small nations like Belgium; the remilitarization of the Rhineland brought the *Wehrmacht* to Belgium’s frontiers; collective security was all but destroyed; and alliances were forming that threatened war. Belgium’s aim must be not to *win* a war but to *avoid* one by creating a military so strong it would deter potential aggressors. This would also contribute to European peace and “create *ipso facto* a right to respect and to the eventual aid of all the states which have an interest in this peace.” Any favoritism to foreign countries, or even a defensive alliance, would divide the country and be almost useless because said foreign countries would only intervene *after* Belgium had already been invaded and ravaged. Belgium must be prepared to resist the opening blows of an aggressor. Leopold then quoted approvingly Spaak’s words of three months earlier, noting that they “respond to our national ideal.” Unfortunately, Belgium lacked the military to fulfill this policy, especially under the threat of a sudden attack. “It assures neither the permanent defense of our fortresses, nor the security of the mobilization, nor that of the concentration of the army. A more or less unexpected irruption could, in several hours, conquer precious security and paralyze irremediably the majority of our forces.” He concluded that “in resolving the military problem in a union of high patriotic understanding, you render to the country at the same time as the serenity of spirit necessary to the consideration of foreign events, the feeling of security indispensable to the definitive resumption of public prosperity.”²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰ Miller, p. 227; corrected draft of Leopold’s October 14, 1936 speech, in ARP, Capelle Papers XV/2/5.

This policy of independence was effectively nothing new to Belgian foreign policy. In 1930, while Belgium was still obligated by the Covenant of the League of Nations, the Franco-Belgian accord and Locarno, King Albert commented, “neutrality. . . responds ideally to our position. If it had not existed, we would have had to invent it.” Paul-Henri Spaak himself, who claimed most of the ministerial responsibility for the policy, noted in his memoirs that “[m]any people think this policy differed fundamentally from the line the country had previously followed. This is not so. . . . It is true that the policy failed. . . . However, I still believe it was the only possible course. It was the only way to maintain national unity and ensure the country’s survival.” The policy was wildly popular among the Belgians although some, especially Walloon partisans, including Jean Rey, a communal counselor from Liège, and R. Dupriez, blamed the Flemish and complained that the defense of the eastern border and of Wallonia “necessarily implies staff accords” to coordinate rapid French help and that the new policy not only weakened the Belgian military but also Britain and France. “It is this abandonment [of the accords] that puts in peril the territorial integrity of Wallonia and which exposes it to becoming once again the battlefield of Europe in case of Franco-German conflict.” However, Paul Struye in *Libre Belgique*, spoke for the vast majority by noting the preponderant support for the new policy and pointing out that

there is an essential difference between the system of 1925 and that of 1937. Under the authority of Locarno, Belgium was automatically and obligatorily dragged into any war between France and Germany. To the contrary, our new status leaves us chances—we do not put a figure to them—of remaining outside of the conflict. M. Jean Rey and the Liberal Walloons, do they not believe that it is in diminishing the risks of war to Belgium that the interests of Wallonia are the most efficaciously served?

In the wake of the king's speech, which was republished and distributed, the new defense bill was passed by both houses of parliament in December by the largest majorities ever achieved for a Belgian defense bill.²⁷¹

Belgium's new policy did not go over so well abroad, especially in France. Spaak immediately noted that France could object to the Belgian desire to avoid being a guarantor in the new Locarno by saying it would break the ties that bound the two countries since the war. Spaak, however, argued the new policy was actually favorable to France because it was the only one that would unite all Belgians and if Germany "provoked" a war, it would be in France's interest to have a united Belgium at its side. "Any policy which, at the current hour, comes up against the sentiments of the Flemish population would be of a nature to reduce our defense. France would be as much a victim as ourself." Van Langenhove reported on an October 15 meeting between Spaak and the French ambassador, who expressed the surprise of the French Government at the royal discourse. "*Feigned* surprise. The French Government knew what it would contain by the conversation that MM. Spaak, Van Langenhove, and van Zuylen have had recently in Geneva with MM. Delbos and Massigli [the adjunct director of policy at the Quai d'Orsay. Emphasis in the original]." Alex L  ger in Paris also complained to the Belgian ambassador that the new Belgian policy was not in accord with previous Belgian actions and the French felt betrayed. Kerchove responded that "the King had never used the term 'neutrality' to characterize Belgian foreign policy, but rather that of 'independence of foreign policy'" and that the new policy did not exclude staff talks. These were hotly

²⁷¹ Wullus-Rudiger, *Les Origines Internationales*, p. 81; Spaak, p. 10; Wullus-Rudiger, *Ibid.*, pp. 87-8; M. Jean Rey, "La Politique   trang  re de la Belgique," *Gazette de Charleroi*, June 29, 1937, in AMBAE 11185/1, "Politique Militaire"; R. Dupriez, "La Politique Ind  pendante et les accords d'  tat-major," *Gazette de Charleroi* (?), July 4, 1937, in *Ibid.*; Paul Struye, "La Nouvelle Politique Ext  rieure de la Belgique", *Libre Belgique*, June 29, 1937, in AMBAE 11185/1, "Politique Militaire", Miller, p. 247.

demanded by the French military, which threatened that if Belgium ended its guarantee to France, the French army would revise its plans to send a maximum number of divisions to Belgium but would instead send them back to the Swiss border. However, the Belgian chief of staff, Lieutenant General Van den Bergen, noted the “tendentious character” of the threat in that it was in France’s interest to send its army as quickly as possible to help the Belgians, not only to keep the war as far away from France as possible, but also because the line Antwerp-Arlon was much shorter than the French border with Belgium and the French could count on the help of the Belgians. “Thus, with or without a military accord, French interest will push the government of the Republic to send us help as quickly as possible.”²⁷²

The new policy of independence precluded unilateral military treaties while common sense precluded multilateral military treaties that would involve sharing secrets. Thus, Belgium could not accede to France’s wishes for staff talks. Open contacts between the staffs and also between the defense ministers were broken off to preserve Belgian neutrality.²⁷³

On April 24, 1937, the British and French declared their “unqualified acceptance” of Belgium’s policy, released Belgium from its Locarno obligations and those of March 19, 1936, while still guaranteeing their assistance to Belgium in case of need. Five days later, Foreign Minister Spaak declared to the Belgian Parliament that “the Franco-English declaration closes for us this period that one could call the era of military accords.” On

²⁷² Spaak, “Note du M. Spaak”, October 14, 1936, pp. 5-6, in ARP, Capelle Papers, XV/2/3; Van Langenhove, “Entretien de M. Le Ministre avec l’ambassadeur de France le 15 Octobre, 1936”, in ARP, Capelle Papers, XV/2/6 ; Kerchove, “le discours royal du 14 Octobre sur la politique exterieure de la Belgique”, p. 2, Paris, October 16, 1936, in Ibid., XV/2/10.

²⁷³ Van Zuylen(?), “Note pour Monsieur le Ministre,” October 21, 1936, pp. 1-2, in AMBAE 11.096; Ibid., p. 4.

October 13, 1937, Germany freely gave Belgium a declaration analogous to that of Britain and France. Belgium would maintain the policy of “independence” until the beginning of the Second World War.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁴ Keyes, pp. 115, 68; ECNRS, p. 33; Miller, p. 252.

Chapter 5: “What do we need?”

I. The Belgian Army to 1932.

In the previous three chapters, I discussed the impact on Belgian defense policy of the “Flemish Question,” domestic politics, and foreign policy considerations. In this chapter I will examine how military concerns shaped the development of the Belgian Army between 1932 and 1940 and how the concerns themselves were affected by the events of the watershed year of 1936 when, among other events, the German threat, always present in the minds of the Belgian military, took a giant step closer with the advance of German troops into the Rhineland, depriving the Belgian Army of the time on which it counted to prepare itself for a sudden German attack. I will show how the Belgians modernized both their weapons and their tactics in an effort to deter or, at worst, be ready to defend against, a German attack. Minister of National Defense Albert Devèze explained in a radio interview on the anniversary of the 1914 German invasion the importance of a strong Belgian defense:

Why was our territory invaded? It is because, strategically, the enemy had an interest in doing so in order to reach its true objectives, facing England on the one hand, Paris on the other. Suppress this interest, you suppress the violation of our frontier and the participation of Belgium in the World War: the example of Switzerland is decisive in this regard. What, thus, must be done? It is necessary, I do not tire of repeating it, that the organization of our national defense be such that an aggressor can expect by his transit through Belgium neither a gain of time, nor an economy of force, but only the indignation of the civilized world. Then, but only then, can we sleep tranquilly.²⁷⁵

The formation of Belgian defense policy, strictly defined, depended on three individuals and one committee. The relationship between these forces was summarized by Raoul van Overstraeten in a 1934 note:

²⁷⁵ “A la gloire de l’Armée belge: M. Devèze devant le Micro,” Archives du Ministère Belge des Affaires Etrangères [henceforth “AMBAE”], Dossier 11185/1 “Politique Militaire.”

[A]ll military measures of execution or preparation during peacetime are decided by the King, commander in chief, *in accord with the Minister of National Defense.*

The *Chief of the General Staff* is

The right arm of the Minister of N.D. [sic]

He is charged, as such, with the study of works relative to the preparation for war of all the military forces.

The *Superior Council of National Defense* occupies itself, under the presidency of the king and the vice-presidency of the minister, in the framework of existing laws, with all questions of general order and of principle relating to [national defense]. It gives its opinion on the solutions to introduce as well as on the matters assigned to it by the chief of the department.

The system was explained to this historian by a Belgian expert: “In theory, the Minister of Defense could not influence military matters (not having received a military education). His job was indeed to prepare the army for war. In reality, he tried to extend his domain and influence the chief of staff (COS). It was up to the king and his COS to decide on the operations.” In the beginning of the 1932-1940 period the problem for the Chief of the General Staff was Minister of National Defense Devèze overstepping the bounds defined above while the latter part of the period was marked by increasing resentment at the interference by someone not even listed in the above schema: the king’s military advisor, ironically enough the very same Raoul Van Overstraeten who so well defined the different roles. This historian has not seen many references to the Superior Council of National Defense in the documents.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁶Raoul van Overstraeten, “Note sur la Politique Exterieur et la Défense du Pays,” Archives of the Royal Palace, Brussels, Galet-van Overstraeten collection [henceforth “ARP-GVO”], dossier 4, subfolder 1934. At the time this historian examined the collection the documents had not yet been indexed. The archivist informed this researcher that the latter was the first to study the collection. Emphasis in the original. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine; Professor Luc De Vos, e-mail message to the author, April 26, 2005.

The army Albert Devèze inherited as Minister of National Defense at the end of 1932 had been at its height fourteen years earlier, when it fielded twelve infantry divisions (DI) organized into six Army Divisions, a cavalry division, and a division of heavy artillery and maintained an occupation zone on Germany's left bank of the Rhine river approximately between Emmerich in the north and Montjoie in the south. In 1921 Belgium, in imitation of the French occupation of Frankfurt am Main (to protest against German failures to obey Versailles), occupied the bridgehead of Duisburg. In January 1923 France, frustrated by Germany's continued failure to pay reparations in coal and wood required by the Versailles Treaty, sent troops into Germany's main industrial region of the Ruhr. Backed by the 1920 Belgian-French agreement, the Belgian army also sent troops into the Ruhr, occupying a zone approximately 30 kilometers east-west and 20 kilometers north-south. The Germans responded to this mainly with passive resistance although there were attacks on French and Belgian soldiers. Belgian troops would only withdraw two years later. By 1923, despite the demands of the occupation, the Belgian force structure was felt to be excessive for "normal times," since Germany was no longer a threat (for the time being), and great faith was placed in the new League of Nations. Moreover, all available bodies required to rebuild Belgium, and. On October 29 of that year, by royal order, four infantry divisions and their support were eliminated and the army was reorganized into a "first army" (active) of four army corps (CA) of two infantry divisions. There was one CA on occupation duty in Germany. The "first army" also included "army troops" comprising a light division, an army artillery division, military

aviation, a regiment of tanks, a brigade of engineers, and technical troops. There were also eight reserve divisions in a “second army.”²⁷⁷

In protest against the decline of the army, minister of national defense Lieutenant General Kestens and chief of staff lieutenant general Maglinse retired in the beginning of 1926. The army was reorganized again on January 20, 1926²⁷⁸, when it lost another six infantry regiments, three cavalry regiments, five artillery regiments, and an engineer regiment. The “second army” was eliminated. Four months later, the time of service was reduced to ten months for non-cavalrymen and thirteen for mounted services. Many officers (about 800) were fleeing the sinking ship. Charles de Broqueville, the minister of national defense, observed that “from the material point of view, in the military sense of the term, the situation is bad: mobilization is not assured, there are no more reserve units, and even if they existed, they would possess no armament. The coverage [protecting] the mobilization of the country no longer exists.” However, the burden on the Belgian army was lightened when the army left the northern part of its German occupation zone in February 1926. At the end of that year, the light division was reorganized into a Cavalry Corps (*Corps de Cavalerie*, CC) of two cavalry divisions, although the army also lost another four artillery regiments.²⁷⁹

The same year of 1926 saw the arrival on the scene of two important figures for Belgian defense: Charles de Broqueville, former prime minister and former minister of

²⁷⁷Lieutenant Général e.r. Albert Crahay, *L'Armée belge entre les deux guerres* (Bruxelles?: Louis Musin, 1978), pp. 52-53, 68, 70-1; Centre de Documentation Historique des Forces Armées, *Histoire de l'armée Belge de 1830 à nos jours*, vol. II, *De 1920 à nos Jours* (Bruxelles: Editions Centre de Documentation Historique des Forces Armées, 1988) [henceforth “CDHFA”], pp. 20, 26-8, 30.

²⁷⁸CDHFA gives the date as February 13, 1936 (p. 31).

²⁷⁹CDHFA, pp. 32, 34; Charles de Broqueville quoted in Crahay, p. 71.

national defense, who became once again the minister of national defense, and Lieutenant General Émile Galet, who became chief of staff.

General Galet, born to a working class family in 1870, enlisted in the army, where “his tenacious will, put at the service of remarkable faculties,” got him into the *École militaire*, which he left as an artillery second lieutenant. His term in an artillery unit was the only time he dealt directly with troops. He then entered the *École de guerre* (at which institution he later taught), where he shone and was admitted into the Special Corps of the Headquarters. As a mere capitaine-commandant (O-4), Galet became military counselor to King Albert I during World War One. After the war, he commanded the *Ecole royale militaire* until being tabbed for chief of staff.²⁸⁰

General Galet had three main goals: create a good permanent army organization, instruct the troops well according to “coherent regulations,” and create “a strict discipline and a solid cohesion.” He succeeded at the first, with his peacetime organization remaining unchanged until May, 1940. He also succeeded at the second, creating a new *Instruction sur l’emploi tactique des grandes unités* (Instruction on the tactical use of large units) as well as regulations for the various branches, and the third, improving unit cohesion (although he has been criticized for having eliminated the schools for reserve officers and NCOs). Belgian historian and World War II veteran Lieutenant General Albert Crahay observes that “in a short time the influence of the new chief of the general staff [EMGA] made itself felt everywhere. Instruction at all echelons received a new impulse, a coherent doctrine was put into practice, dress became more correct, discipline more exact. Officers were again seen at the casernes in the afternoons.” A less charitable

²⁸⁰ Général Emile Wanty, *Le Milieu Militaire Belge de 1914 à nos Jours*, vol. I (Brussels: Musée Royal de l’Armée et d’Histoire Militaire, 1999), pp. 142-4, 149-150. There appears to be a major divide between those who love General Galet and those who hate him. There seems to be little middle ground.

historian/veteran, General Emile Wanty, declared that “In the matter of the psychology of command, he [Galet] committed astonishing errors of judgment. And yet he was heard, for example, to affirm that a commander of a regiment must take for *adjutant-major* (that is to say his direct aide, the lynchpin of this complex ensemble) the worst of his captains.” In other words, he felt there would somehow be an advantage to a colonel having an incompetent assistant. Galet’s attention to the regular army at the expense of the reserve units has also been marked against him, as has, perhaps more seriously, his excessive attachment to schemes and theories.²⁸¹

At the end of 1927, a new Mixed Commission was established to examine the needs of the military. General Galet argued that

geography makes of Belgium a weak point of the strategic chessboard. Its military state must be strong enough to annul this weakness of situation. . . . [sic] Like lightning, armies throw themselves onto the lines of least resistance. The military state of Belgium must reasonably be strong enough, if possible to avoid war, if not, to contain it at the frontier. If war has to stabilize itself on the Antwerp-Namur-Meuse front, the majority of the country would be ruined. It thus requires an army as solid as our resources permit and *immediately ready for the struggle* in order to stop a surprise attack.

He also called for improvements in armament and equipment as well as fortifications. In response to a call from General Hellebaut for an eighteen-division army (including reserves), General Galet argued that such a large army would be too expensive, would disorganize mobilization, and exceed the available armament. In addition, there would not be enough officers. General Wanty observed that “[Galet’s] ideas can be summarized as an effort concentrated on the six active infantry divisions and the active cavalry division, in deliberately sacrificing the six reserve divisions, and in according only restrained attention to the reserve cadres. Curious aberration of a very active

²⁸¹ Crahay, pp. 116-7.

intelligence.” The Commission, in its order of the day for April 3, 1928, rejected calls for a new reduction in time of service and recommended the assurance of coverage of the frontier, the creation of a sufficient cadre of NCOs and technicians, the provision to the army of modern weapons and equipment, the speeding up of troop training, the creation of fortifications to support the field army, and a new linguistic regime with regional recruitment. A law of November 7, 1928 fixed the term of duty for a first 21,000 draftees at between twelve and fourteen months (fourteen for candidate reserve NCOs, thirteen for mounted troops, and twelve for others) and eight months for a second group of 23,000 draftees.²⁸²

At the Dutch capital of The Hague in a conference in August 1929, the Belgians agreed to pass the Young Plan for German war reparations and to withdraw their last troops from German soil. This latter was, in part, a reward to the Germans for having defeated “a new extremist party—the Nazi party.” The evacuation began on September 16, 1929 and the last Belgian troops left Aachen on November 30. The Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* noted in German: “‘*Aachen ist frei!*’ [‘Aachen is free!'] The festivities which follow the departure of our troops and the discourses which accompany them are of more significance. The Germans have learned nothing and forgotten nothing. Belgians, you are warned!” The last Belgian troops were home by the end of June, 1930.²⁸³

General Galet left the general staff on December 21, 1932 by reason of advanced age, four days after a new Minister of National Defense came on the scene.²⁸⁴

II. The Devèze Years

²⁸² General Galet quoted in Crahay, p. 108 (emphasis in the original), pp. 112, 115; Général Emile Wanty, I: 150-1; CDHFA, p. 36.

²⁸³ CDHFA., p. 37; *Le Soir*, quoted in *ibid.*.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

A. Devèze versus Nuyten

The dominant figure for Belgian defense in the first part of the 1932-1940 period was the Minister of National Defense, Albert Devèze. A child of Ypres in West Flanders, Devèze was born in 1881. By profession a lawyer and a Doctor of Laws, M. Devèze was also a major Liberal Party politician. He was the representative of the *arrondissement* of Brussels from 1912 to 1939, at which time he switched to the *arrondissement* of Verviers, which he represented until 1946, finishing up back in Brussels from 1946 to 1958, and dying a year later.²⁸⁵

Devèze was a veteran of World War I, in which he fought as an infantryman and then an artilleryman. He would remain a reserve officer even while serving as Minister of National Defense, which he did for the first time starting on November 20, 1920. The French military attaché in Brussels at the time, General Latour, described Devèze as “possess[ing] remarkable qualities of intelligence, of activity, of ability to work; he is full of good will, but also of an extreme pride, of an absolute confidence in himself, and of excessive ambition.”²⁸⁶

Devèze was also, as we have seen, a rabid Walloon partisan. It was under his ministry that Belgium sent three battalions of infantry and three batteries of artillery into the Ruhr on April 6, 1923 to help the French persuade the Germans to pay their war reparations. That August, Devèze succeeded in increasing the term of service for infantrymen to twelve months from ten and to thirteen for artillerymen while reducing the terms for the service branches to ten months. He was replaced on August 6 of that same year. He would return to the Ministry of National Defense on October 23, 1932, having

²⁸⁵Yves-William Delzenne and Jean Houyoux, *Le Nouveau Dictionnaire des Belges, de 1830 à nos Jours*, vol. A-H (Wavre, Belgium: Le Cri and La Libre Belgique, 1998), s.v. Devèze, Albert.

²⁸⁶Crahay, pp. 66-68; General Serot Almeras Latour, quoted in *Ibid.*

lost none of his “activity,” “absolute confidence in himself,” or “excessive ambition.” In 1934, General Swaegers, a departing *aide de camp* of King Albert I, described M. Devèze to then-Colonel Raoul van Overstraeten as “of impulsive temperament, impulsive, has a new idea every day. King Albert said ‘myself, I do not have a new idea every day.’ On the other hand, the minister is active; he stimulates, he circulates. . . .[sic]” Van Overstraeten himself wrote “I keep the image of the minister. . . behind his desk, the authoritarian gesture, the rapid and precise language, the gaze scrutinizing my impressions, spying my least reflexes on my fact, even while he read certain texts on the desk.” The next year, Louis Wodon, the chief of King Leopold’s cabinet, complained in a note to the king that Devèze was running amok and exceeding his mandate, which was *only* “to prepare the instrument of defense, the army, and to put this latter in a state to play its role in case of war.” As Wodon pointed out, it was *not* the business of the Ministry of National Defense to decide whether an idea was a good one. That would have been a military question, not a political one. Devèze saw things differently. In a 1934 interview, he was asked whether he was opposing the policy of the general staff. He responded, in essence, that the general staff had no policy; it did what it was told. “The king commands. The minister is responsible before the Parliament and before the country. The general staff is an organ of study, of technical information, and, once the decisions are taken, of execution. There is the constitutional truth. The minister who permits it to be otherwise would be guilty. Need I tell you. . . my conscience is tranquil?” The minister appears to have had, in actuality, no responsibility for operational matters. It seems that Albert Devèze had a problem keeping within his job description. A Belgian correspondent for the Swiss *Gazette de Lausanne* observed that “it is incontestable that a

profound change has been produced, with the retirement of General Galet and the arrival of M. Devèze, chief of the liberal party, in the Ministry of National Defense, in the doctrines and the intentions of the high staff.”²⁸⁷ Minister Devèze’s first chief of staff was Lieutenant General Nuyten, a disciple of General Galet, a “‘practitioner,’ ‘professional,’ military historian, more truly chief than his predecessor, although he had not served with the troops other than his command as a colonel.” While General Galet had been solitary, General Nuyten spent his time among the staff at headquarters. “He constantly called one or another officer to discuss a question. He did not reject contradiction, accepted even certain points of view, but not for long. His extremely mobile intelligence was without cease on the lookout for a new idea. Each day brought his modification to measures taken.” On the other hand, General Swaegers, the departing aide-de-camp for liaison, described Nuyten as “very susceptible, he regards all difference of opinion as a personal attack. . . . I have attempted to conciliate the chief of the general staff and the minister by friendly conversations. But Nuyten immediately put me in my place. . . . Since then, I have not spoken to him.” Nuyten was also reputed to be a Francophobe, like his predecessor.²⁸⁸

Luc De Vos, a professor at the Belgian École royale militaire informed this historian, “the three decision-makers on military matters [the king, the minister of national defense, and the chief of staff] always quarreled. When you had personalities

²⁸⁷ Wanty, I: 127, 134, 156; Raoul van Overstraeten, *Albert Ier-Leopold III. Vingt ans de politique militaire belge—1920-1940* (Bruges: Desclée-De Brouwer, 1949), diary entry for April 15, 1934, p. 110; *Ibid.*, diary entry for 23 April, 1934, p. 113; Louis Wodon, “Note au Roi 10 Mai 1935,” ARP-GVO 4, sub-folder 1935A; Crahay, pp. 19-20; “Interview donné au ‘Soir’ par M. Devèze, Ministre de la Defense Nationale,” *Circulaire d’Information no 24*. AMBAE 11185/1; R. Dupriez, “Lettre de Belgique,” *Gazette de Lausanne*, March 28, 1933, attached to Le Jeune de Munsbach to Paul Hymans, March 29, 1933, Archives Ministère Belge des Affaires Étrangères, 11179, “1933.”

²⁸⁸ Wanty, I: 154-5; General Swaegers quoted in van Overstraeten, diary entry for April 15, 1934, p. 110; Raoul van Overstraeten quoted in Crahay, p. 130.

like Devèze and Nuyten, it became even more difficult to decide.” The first big battle between Devèze and Nuyten was over two (ostensibly) conflicting strategies for the defense of Belgium against a German attack: defense at the frontier against defense in depth. In other words, should the Belgian army and its fortifications be concentrated on Belgium’s eastern border or should the army prepare several lines of resistance going west from the Meuse River? In light of the German invasion of 1914 and the atrocities committed by the German troops, many Belgians, and certainly many Belgian generals, deeply distrusted the Germans. The plan had been, in the absence of enough troops to defend against a surprise German attack either directly across the common border and/or after the Germans invaded the Netherlands, to base the defense on Antwerp, Namur, and Givet—a much shorter line that could not be easily turned. In aid of this, the Fortified Positions of Antwerp, Namur, and Liège would be renovated (as recommended by the 1928 Mixed Commission), a bridgehead would be created at Ghent, and the modern fort of Eben-Emael would be created. In any case, the main line of defense would be on the Meuse River forward of Liège. Even this troop concentration was soon moved eastward. However, voices, supported by the French, were raised calling for an integral defense of Belgium at the frontier. The call was supported by the majority of Walloon opinion, which remembered the suffering of Wallonia under the Germans in the First World War, and took the form of support for minister Devèze against the general staff, as exemplified by a 1936 letter from Stembert-les-Verviers:

It has come to our attention that the Government wants to abandon the defense of the East under the pressure of Generals Gallet [sic] and Nuytens [sic].

As much in my own name as in the names of all those, and they are numerous, with whom I have discussed the question today, I want to protest energetically against this baseness, because it is a baseness to

abandon an easily defendable part of the territory in order to retrench behind an illusory line of the Escaut. What is the point then of having an army and officers!!²⁸⁹

Opponents of the plan for defense included Raoul van Overstraeten, who condemned the plan for leaving the French border unguarded and for implying that French intervention would be sought *before* a German invasion. He called for a main line of resistance on the Antwerp-Namur axis, which would “reinforce. . . the Franco-Belgian resistance to a German aggression.” Lieutenant General and Chief of Staff from 1936 to 1940 Eduard Van den Bergen argued to Minister Devèze that

what the nation, and in particular, the population of Liège [in far-eastern Belgium] must be made to understand is that it is not the spacing out of our resistance, be it carried to the very frontier, that will be able to save Liège from destruction. What we must accomplish is to turn away from our country the aggressive designs of Germany. It will only attack if it hopes to succeed quickly and with few losses. The choice of a solid position, well backed up by an obstacle like the Meuse, of an extent proportionate to the effectives which can be assigned to its defense is alone susceptible of inciting the German High Command to carry elsewhere its efforts which our front would be capable of breaking. There shelters the sole safeguard of the city of Liège and of Belgium as a whole.

Not even all residents of eastern Belgium were in favor of defense at the frontier. A group of Ardennais, “all ardent patriots who have made war,” sent a twelve-page memo arguing against such a plan because it would require a battalion to guard fifteen kilometers (the generally accepted maximum for defensive purposes being 1200 meters). “This would be a thin spider-web punctured with a steel chisel by the Germans” who would then attack the Belgians in the Ardennes from the north, east, and west if the Belgians attempted to hold in place or, if the Belgians attempted to retreat from the frontier, the Belgian units would be driven back until they became useless. “In sum, they

²⁸⁹Luc De Vos, e-mail message to the author, April 26, 2005; CDHFA, p. 35; Wanty, pp. 156; Crahay, p. 123; Letter dated 11 June 1936 from Stembert-les-Verviers, MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983) subfolder “Suggestions.”

will furnish trophies to the enemy and cause the devastation of the entire frontier zone without their sacrifice having, far from it, corresponded to the profit drawn from it.”

Indeed,

*Germany will obtain at a reduced price, against our troops, a capital success from the first day of the war. The system of defense of Luxembourg at the frontier—system Devèze-Bovesse [another Walloon politician]—is a monstrous error which will result in the massacre of the population of all this province, without any possible useful result for Belgium or for France. [Emphasis in the original]*²⁹⁰

The campaign against the General Staff and its perceived plan got so bad that King Albert was forced to send a letter to minister Devèze in which he complained that “the polemics of journals which have arisen *à propos* the Belgian defensive system offer dangers to which I believe I have to draw your attention. One risks panicking opinion by unconsidered attacks against the General Staff which cannot defend itself, and which the minister himself can only with difficulty defend to the Parliament. . . .” Albert condemned the idea of the integral defense of the frontiers as “absurd, and calamitous to Belgium if, God forbid, a war comes to break out, [and] the military authority, as much in the period of preparation as in the period of execution, committed the weakness of being inspired by such a rudimentary strategy!”²⁹¹

In fact, there was not much difference between the two plans, at least as conceived by Minister Devèze and the General Staff. Emile Wanty points out that in their testimony to the 1928 Mixed Commission, all the witnesses pronounced themselves in favor of defense at the frontier but differed as to whether a surprise attack from Germany could be

²⁹⁰ Van Overstraeten ,diary entry for March 15, 1934, p. 108; note from Van den Bergen to Devèze reproduced in Van Overstraeten, diary entry for March 24, 1936, p. 212; “Ce qu’on reproche au périlleux système de défense du Luxembourg à la frontière,” pp. 2-4, 12, in ARP-GVO 4.

²⁹¹ Van Overstraeten, p. 83; original letter from the King to M. Devèze, dated 31 Dec. 32 in ARP-GVO 1930-1934, also quoted in van Overstraeten, pp. 83-87.

expected, which affected their views of the proper strategy. One of Colonel Van Overstraeten's friends wrote to him that Minister Devèze had not in fact changed General Galet's plan of defense "starting from the frontier" but that Devèze had placed the emphasis on "frontier" rather than on "starting from." General Nuyten, a major target of written attacks, declared to the Third Army Corps that

it is incontestable that the Chief of Staff has never sought to abandon the smallest portion of national territory.

You will not receive the order to fight in retreat if the circumstances do not imperiously impose it. Battle is not a question of will, but rather of the relationship of forces. . . .

If the enemy opposes to you only a part of his forces such that battle can be accepted with a chance of success, I will not hesitate to join it. If, on the contrary, our army must battle the massed army of a people of 60 million inhabitants, I feel that to leave our army alone to battle the enemy would be to doom it to *destruction* and to rush to a certain disaster, and I refuse to adopt such a solution.

In evoking the operations of 1914, I remind you that it is the retreat to the Yser which saved the army and the country.

And in a 1935 letter from Charles Grégoire to the president of the Senate summarizing a meeting between Grégoire and the French General Henri Pétain observed that the Superior Council of the French Army unanimously agreed that "the normal defense of Belgium, delimited by natural elements, finds itself on the Meuse.—These gentlemen estimate that it would be absolutely impossible to think of defending all the territory of Belgium." They proposed rather just a light screening force on the frontier to protect the units forming up on the Meuse. The quarrel between proponents of the integral defense of the frontier and those of defense in depth would only be resolved with the replacement of Minister Devèze in June 1936, after the conditions had changed with the Germans reoccupying the Rhineland and the French planning only to advance as far as the Antwerp-Namur-Meuse position. The Belgians were thus robbed of the precious time to

prepare and mobilize that the demilitarization of the Rhineland afforded them (because the Germans would have been seen coming in literally miles away) and deprived of the assistance necessary to any chance of actually holding the Germans at the frontier. The integral defense of the country at the frontier thus became impractical.²⁹²

One of Minister Devèze's projects for the defense of the frontier was the creation of an elite light infantry regiment (later expanded to a corps), composed mainly of volunteers, to guard the heavily wooded and relatively hilly Ardennes region and Belgian Luxembourg in general, the vulnerability of which was recognized as early as the 1870-'71 Franco-Prussian War. On February 7, 1933, a new organization, the Command of the Troops [for the] Defense of Luxembourg and Namur ("TDLN"), was formed to which the new light infantry regiment would belong. The creation of this regiment, and the later formation of the *Unités cyclistes frontières* ("Units of Frontier Cyclists"), represented encroachments on the territory of the chief of staff. The 10th Line Infantry Regiment based in Arlon was renamed the *Régiment de Chasseurs ardennais* ("Ardennes Light Infantry Regiment") by royal decree 34284 on March 10, 1933. The new unit was to have a distinctive uniform to reflect its new status; élite units usually have a unique badge or uniform accessory to emphasize that they are above the ordinary. These indicators, like the green beret worn by American Special Forces, become greatly prized and fiercely guarded. They bring great respect for those who have earned the indicator. Ideas based on the uniforms of the élite German *Grenzschtützen* (border guards) or the Italian *Alpini* (mountain light infantry who wore, and still wear a distinctive cap with a feather) or the

²⁹² Wanty, I: 147; undated letter from Robert Leurquin to Raoul van Overstraten, ARP-GVO 1930-1934; Declaration of Lieutenant General Nuyten to 3 C.A. at Beverloo (on September 30?), ARP-GVO 4 1934, emphasis in the original; Undated letter from Charles Grégoire to Maurice Lippens enclosed in a letter from Maurice Lippens to Raoul van Overstraten, ARP-GVO 4 1935; Crahay, pp. 171-2.

French *Chasseurs Alpins* (mountain light infantry who sport(ed) an oversized blue beret) were rejected in favor of retaining the standard infantry uniform with the addition of a green beret (no other Belgian unit wore a beret at that time) sporting a wild boar's head badge--the wild boar being native to the Ardennes and celebrated for its tenacity--and special unit insignia colors, "pine green collar tags with a red border, also bearing the wild boar's head." That September, the regiment was provided with a platoon of six Belgian-made 47mm anti-tank guns mounted on British Carden Lloyd Mark VI light tank chassis, known as T-13s. The platoon of four Belgian-made 76mm mortars came on January 15, 1934. That July, at Minister Devèze's instigation, in light of Arlon's isolation and the distance separating it from its combat positions, the Ardennes Light Infantry Regiment was disbanded in favor of three mixed groups, each consisting of a *Chasseurs ardennais* battalion, a battalion of Frontier Cyclists, and mortars and anti-tank guns. These groups would be based at Arlon, Vielsalm, and Bastogne and were officially formed on August 31 while they received their flags on September 15, 1934.²⁹³

The original plan was, in case of German attack, that each group would fight from their pillboxes near the frontier, "then withdraw along a principle axis, marked by stops behind the previewed and prepared destructions and obstructions which would be *defended by fire*. This methodical movement in retreat would finally lead the *Chasseurs ardennais* [sic] to the Belgian upper Meuse."²⁹⁴

In September 1934, the *Groupe d'Artillerie des Chasseurs ardennais*, the artillery group for the unit, was created with three batteries of 75mm Swedish Bofors field guns. On November 19, 1934, the three mixed groups and the artillery group were combined

²⁹³ CDHFA 42; Crahay, p. 132; Commandant Luc Vangansbeke, "Resist and Bite! The story of the Belgian Ardennes Rifles (Unpublished paper courtesy of the Museum of the *Chasseurs ardennais*), p. 6.

²⁹⁴ Wanty, pp. 159-160.

into the *Corps des Chasseurs ardennais*, with its headquarters at Arlon, under the command of Major-General B.E.M. Jacqmain, the last commander of the 10th Line Infantry Regiment and the first commander of the *Régiment de Chasseurs ardennais*. On September 26, 1935, Major-General Jacqmain was replaced by Lieutenant-General de Neve de Roden, who was replaced in 1936 by Lieutenant-General Pire while in October of that year the Corps transferred its headquarters to the beautiful town of Namur (which is now the capital of the federal region of Wallonia) at the junction of the Meuse and Sambre rivers. On March 24, 1937 the mixed groups were renamed regiments and the Corps became the *Division des Chasseurs ardennais* on July 1. In September 1938 the artillery group was reinforced with a 105mm howitzer battalion and became the *Régiment d'Artillerie des Chasseurs ardennais* and the artillerists received the green beret, but with “two crossed cannons on a gearwheel” replacing the wild boar’s head. On the day after Christmas, 1938, Lieutenant-General Pire was replaced by Lieutenant-General Deffontaine, who was replaced on July 25, 1939 by Lieutenant-General Ley.²⁹⁵

The *Chasseurs* were noted for their modern light weapons, including the 1935 and 1936 models of the Mauser system rifles and carbines, the Model 1930 light machine gun (a license-built Browning Automatic Rifle), the Fabrique Nationale GP pistol, and the DBT grenade launcher. They also received bicycles (the *Chasseurs* battalions had been on foot) and motorcycles by Gillet, FN, and Sarolea allowing the formation of a motorcycle company per regiment. In 1938 the *Chasseurs* lost their 76mm mortars but were compensated with an augmentation in the number of T-13s (now sixteen per regiment) and the provision of three T-15 light tanks (the same chassis as the T-13 but with a 13.2mm Hotchkiss machine gun in a turret) per regiment. With this equipment, the

²⁹⁵ Vangansbeke, pp. 6-7.

Chasseurs ardennais impressed the German high command in 1939 and would give a very good account of themselves in 1940.²⁹⁶

To replace the lost 10th Line Infantry Regiment in the Third Army Corps, the 14th Line Infantry Regiment was raised on June 15, 1934. Even this was not without controversy. General Nuyten drew Minister Devèze's attention to the fact that the new formation, and the proposed six new artillery groups (one per infantry division) would aggravate the already serious lack of trained officers—they were 175 short on January 1, 1933 and 412 short on January 1, 1934—such that the need for 200 officers for these units would put the Belgian army, by the most generous accounting, 612 officers in the hole. In fact, the numbers should have been higher and the army would be down 1,000 officers for the mobilized forces. The “military contributor” of *Metropole* complained that the creation of a new active-duty regiment would “weaken—probably in quantity and certainly in quality—the annual contingents of the other units which, although called active, dispose—and still not all—of only a single contingent present under arms and of at least two classes of reservists” and that things would only get worse if, as some demanded, new peacetime *divisions* were created. The proposed reorganization would result in the army being too small in terms of immediately deployable soldiers to wage the kind of “*decisive* battle at the frontier” desired by the minister.²⁹⁷

In September, 1933, a 700 million franc loan was awarded to the Ministry of National Defense by Prime Minister de Broqueville. Minister Devèze wanted to spend BF230 million on fortifications, BF430 million on equipment for the field army, BF30

Vangansbeke, p. 7; Crahay, p. 165.

²⁹⁷ Crahay, p. 133; CDHFA, p. 42; Nuyten to Devèze, dated March 12, 1934, ARP-GVO 4 1934, subfolder Creation du 14e Line”; “notre collaborateur militaire,” [“Our military contributor”] *Metropole*, August 22, 1934, ARP-GVO 4 1934. Emphasis in the original.

million on casernes, and BF10 million on the Ghent bridgehead. General Nuyten complained to the king that he “would prefer zero for the fortifications and no loan but a reasonable and spaced out [“échelonné] extraordinary budget.” However, Devèze, “either by profound conviction or by electioneering, was sworn to have the last word.” On October 11, 1933, his platform for defense at the frontier was approved. The plan included the defense of the Herve plateau by the creation of a new belt of fortifications around Liège with three new, modern forts—Aubin Neufchâteau, Battice, and Pepinster—Tancrémont²⁹⁸—and 179 pillboxes, generally for two automatic weapons. It also included the defense of the Ardennes by demolitions blocking roads or destroying bridges, pillboxes, and specialized troops; and new equipment for the field army.²⁹⁹

On February 18, 1934, Belgian King Albert I died in a mountain-climbing accident at Marche-les-Dames in the Ardennes. He was replaced by his son Leopold, whose military advisor, Raoul Van Overstraeten, would to a great degree shape the Belgian Army. Van Overstraeten had made a name for himself in World War One, as an advisor during the Belgian victory at Haelen in 1914 and in the victory by Belgian colonial troops at Tabora in (formerly) German East Africa in 1916. He taught military history at the École militaire from 1919 to 1927 and the art of war at the École de guerre up to 1933 and became commandant of the latter in 1939. He also served as military advisor to King Albert. He was made *aide de camp* for liaison with the Ministry of National Defense and, according to Belgian historian, lieutenant-general, and veteran of 1940, Albert Crahay, “no important decision was made without his consent.” This, in fact, was a facet of his unpleasant personality: he was a micromanager. Lieutenant-

²⁹⁸ Tancrémont would resist until the day *after* the Belgian surrender. CDHFA, p. 146.

²⁹⁹ Crahay, p. 130; Nuyten quoted in *Ibid.*, pp. 130-1; CDHFA, p. 39, 72.

General Oscar Michiels, after his return from German captivity after May 1940, complained that “the least relief between [infantry divisions] occupying the Albert Canal, the least displacement of any element whatsoever, was ordered by the military counselor of the King, who intervened even in the means of execution in fixing, for example, the number of stages [of marches].” This was far from van Overstraeten’s only problem.

General Michiels went on to say that he “always abided with difficulty [Van Overstraeten’s] unyielding, authoritarian character; his curt ways which did him so much harm in the minds of his comrades and which persisted despite all.” Michiels was far from the only Belgian soldier who had problems with van Overstraeten. Lieutenant Colonel Blake, the British Military Attaché reported in a confidential note to British Ambassador to Belgium Sir Lancelot Oliphant on the resignation of General Van den Bergen as chief of staff in February 1940 that

[t]he reason which is the more generally accepted one is that there has been, for some time, a state of friction between General Van den Bergen and Major-General Van Overstraeten, the King’s A.D.C. . . . It has been stated that his interference in matters concerning the higher command has exceeded the normal influence of a Commandant of the Staff College and Military Advisor to the Sovereign. It is possible that General Van den Bergen has been irritated to such an extent by this interference that he decided that either he or General Van Overstraeten had to go, and that the King ruled in favour of retaining the services of the latter. . . . The opinion that General Van den Bergen’s resignation came about as the result of friction between himself and General Van Overstraeten is held, so they inform me, by the French and United States Military Attachés.

However, Van Overstraeten was also an excellent instructor and one of his former students, who went on to become a general, remembered that “the result was dazzling, and young students that we were, little inclined to the blind admiration of our professors, immediately recognized a superior mind.” General Emile Wanty described Van Overstraeten as

endowed with a profound knowledge of military history, proved by his course at the Ecole de Guerre, exposed synthetically, clearly, but showing flaws in the critical examination of sources and resulting in dogmatism. . . . Colonel Van Overstraten possessed an indisputable aptitude for the large views of the whole, for the gripping summaries. He understood the modern forms of war; he was one of the co-authors of the motorization of the cavalry.

He would go on to play a major role in the campaign in 1940.³⁰⁰

Upon Leopold's accession, Minister Devèze threatened to resign if General Nuyten "continued to oppose his projects." That March, Devèze went to Paris to meet with French generals and the French minister of war, Marshal Henri Pétain, who told him the French army would go only as far as the Meuse upriver from Namur. This nullified one of the most important assumptions of the plan for the integral defense at the frontier-- that the French would take charge of the defense of Luxembourg. In the face of Devèze's protests, the French generalissimo General Weygand promised to send some French units further if the Belgians held the Germans at the border and invited the French army into the country "in useful time." Nuyten complained that "the Minister of National Defense has not judged it necessary to worry himself about my prerogatives [in dealing with the French]. As for the French staff, it arranges that I know nothing of what happens."³⁰¹

An April 13 note promised two French infantry divisions and three cavalry divisions at the covering position within two days of their deployment at the Franco-Belgian border. Albert Crahay sums up the situation: "the evacuation of the Rhineland

³⁰⁰ Crahay, pp. 135, 143-5; "copie d'une note manuscrite rédigée par le Lieutenant Général MICHIELS après son retour de captivité," pp. 1, 3, SGRS-S/A, Campagne 1940, Généralités G1, Carton A, Folder 2, sub folder b; Blake to Oliphant dated 10th February 1940, MRA-AMB 80/4, #84, 85; www.google.com search: "Sir Lancelot Oliphant"; Wanty I:176.

³⁰¹ Crahay, pp. 132-3; Nuyten, March 14, 1934, ARP-GVO 4 1934

and the caution of Marshal Pétain had transformed the strategic situation of the Belgian Army. The old Franco-Belgian military accord had had its day.”³⁰²

Nevertheless, 1934 saw many successes for Minister Devèze. That April the Parliament had voted him credits for the positioning of the *Chasseurs ardennais* and the *Unités cyclistes frontières*; the creation of the 14th Line Infantry Regiment and supplementary artillery units for three infantry regiments; the constitution of six “second reserve” infantry divisions; and the preservation of the integral defense at the frontier. These plans were largely opposed by General Nuyten because the annual draft contingent was too small, there was a lack of officers and NCOs, and the necessary credits were extravagant at a time of economic depression. He felt that “in wanting to develop the army too much, it would be weakened. As to maintaining the battle line at the frontier, it was a utopia, if Belgium appealed for French aid only after the violation of its territory.” King Leopold, however, supported the minister.³⁰³

In the provinces of Liège and Limburg, and formed for the same purpose as the *Chasseurs ardennais*, the *Unités cyclistes frontière* (units of frontier cyclists) were raised from volunteers on March 1, 1934 at the camp of Beverloo. Initially, units were deployed at Maaseik, Liège, Verviers, Arlon, Vielsalm, and Bastogne, with the last three earmarked for the *Régiment de Chasseurs ardennais*, which they joined on August 30, 1934. By May 1, 1935, the frontier cyclists consisted of two battalions: one in Limburg (Maaseik and Lanaken) with its headquarters at Maaseik and one in Liège (Verviers, Visé, Hombourg, Henri-Chapelle, and Malmédy) with its headquarters in Verviers. They were reinforced on March 24, 1937 into three battalions with headquarters in Maaseik,

³⁰²Crahay, pp. 132-3.

³⁰³ Crahay, pp. 132-3.

Visé and Verviers. They became the *Régiment cycliste frontière* on October 1 of that same year.³⁰⁴

In October, 1934, General Nuyten sent a note appealing to Devèze for budget cuts in which Nuyten told the minister that “I am still opposed to your military conceptions. . . I relieve [myself] of my responsibility *vis-à-vis* the government.” Later that month, without the knowledge of Minister Devèze, Nuyten sent Prime Minister de Broqueville (who had been Nuyten’s boss when de Broqueville was minister of national defense and Nuyten was his principal private secretary) a list of suggested budget cuts aimed mainly at Devèze’s pet projects.³⁰⁵ He recommended the elimination of “two (motorized) cavalry regiments, of 2100 Frontier Cyclists, of the artillery group of the *Chasseurs ardennais*, of a part of the anti-aircraft artillery, of the anticipated forts on the plateau of Herve (except Battice).” Minister Devèze was furious and fired General Nuyten, offering him instead the command of the Second Army Corps. Nuyten rejected the offer and retired. He explained to Devèze that

Considering the slanderous press campaign of which I am the object, this change would embarrass me in the eyes of public opinion and of the army; it could only be interpreted as a disavowal by the government of sympathies and of professional acts against the national interest which are attributed to me without the least proof.

In any case, it is a matter of a sanction and my dignity is challenged.

Consequently, I regret not being able to accept the offer you have made to me.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁴CDHFA. pp. 42-3; Crahay, p. 131; Vangansbeke, p. 6;

³⁰⁵This does not seem to have been a personal vendetta but rather two opposed conceptions of what was necessary for Belgium’s defense. See Wanty, I: 157.

³⁰⁶Wanty I:164; Crahay, p. 133-4; Wanty states that the letter was sent to Devèze, I:164; Nuyten to Monsieur le Ministre de la Défense Nationale, Personal and secret, dated 12 Octobre 1934, ARP-GVO 4 1934.

According to Emile Wanty, “witnesses still remember the meeting, short but impressive in its curtness, in the course of which General Nuyten took leave of his collaborators at the General Staff of the Army, after having expressed, in broken phrases said in a strangled voice, his surprise, his being deceived, and his will to continue to serve the country.” Leopold, not wanting to threaten the government, did not intervene to save Nuyten. The former complained that he had been forced to deal unfairly with General Nuyten, “an elite officer, eminent servant of the country, and whom my father honored with his confidence” and fire him without warning because of his disagreement with Devèze over the integral defense of the nation. Others, however, were not as sorry to see Nuyten go. Radio Wallonie crowed that “the events of the week [i.e. Nuyten v. Devèze] have revealed the peril by which Wallonia is menaced. We hope that the example [firing Nuyten] will have struck. . . and that in the future sanctions will be taken against any act of indiscipline contrary to the will of the nation.” Emile Wanty notes that “to the honor of the two protagonists, Minister Devèze and the Chief of the General Staff of the Army struggled, the one and the other, for the ideas that they believed right, for the general good that they believed they were defending best, and not for any personal interest whatsoever.” Wanty feels that Nuyten was right in his belief that the lack of immediately deployable forces and the delay in French aid meant that a battle at the frontier was doomed to failure although Nuyten and his predecessor should have done more to augment the number of available forces “by a policy of cadres, above all of reserve cadres” and should have supported “without delay the principle of the creation of covering units, [and] kept personal contacts with the French High Command in order to make his point of view triumph.” Devèze was right to support a system of fortifications

east of the Meuse “but he should have given to this last less scale perhaps and certainly more coherence; not to see in it the skeleton of a battlefield, which it could not be, but a vast delaying disposition.” Albert Crahay found Nuyten to have been right in rejecting the call to commit the Belgian army to a very long line very close to the frontier but Nuyten was wrong in constantly opposing Devèze’s ideas, “even those which reinforced our military effort.” Devèze should have left operational matters to the General Staff and should have kept the debate out of the media.³⁰⁷

The issue then became the finding of a replacement for General Nuyten. Albert Devèze preferred General Edouard Van den Bergen.³⁰⁸ “It is, I assure you, a choice which would respond to the unanimous sentiment of the army—which would definitively put an end to all the difficulties, polemics, and controversies—which would permit me, by the most fruitful collaboration, rapidly to complete my task and to return to the civil peace towards which. . . I aspire.” King Leopold was also working through the problem. He found that General Van den Bergen had a “negative tendency.” General van Emelin “knows nothing.” General Cumont, who was due to be pensioned off in September 1935, was described by Leopold variously as having a “very great intelligence,” “intelligible,” “at the moment strong,” and “is close to Van den Bergen,” but he was “too much an artillerist” and “has to become an infantryman.” Cumont was selected on October 24, 1934. He was described by Emile Wanty as having a “cool character, clear spirit, firm

³⁰⁷ Wanty, I: 165; draft written by Raoul van Overstraeten, approved and sent by Leopold, ARP-GVO 4 1934; Radio Wallonie quoted by Van Overstraeten, diary entry of October 20 1934, p. 133; Wanty, I: 157, 164; Crahay, p. 134.

³⁰⁸ Also seen as “Vandenbergen” and even “Van den Berghe.”

judgment, frequently incisive tone, true temperament of a chief, seeing the ensembles, deciding with promptitude, he impressed all.”³⁰⁹

Upon Cumont’s appointment the French expressed their desire to renew staff talks and General Cumont went to Paris with the advice of the King to act “as chief of staff of an army of which one would be very pleased to have the aid, and not as a poor parent who comes to beg that somebody get him out of trouble.” The main Belgian talking points were the possibility of a German attack through Dutch Limburg and the desire to join battle only at the time and place at which all forces were reunited. The French, who had not considered the former as a possibility, declared the “hope” that two French divisions would deploy towards Turnhout and Hasselt behind the Belgian lines starting from the sixth day of mobilization. Another six, and a brigade of *Spahis*³¹⁰ would be available twelve days later. Cumont and the French, including Generalissimo Gamelin (who would be fired partway through the May-June 1940 campaign) reached an agreement that in a new war against the Germans the Belgians would be responsible for Antwerp, Limburg, and Liège while the French would be responsible for Arlon and for closing the Luxembourg gap by controlling the Lesse and Meuse rivers.³¹¹

On March 16, 1935, the Germans announced the inception of conscription and the creation of a thirty-six division army, more than tripling the size of their army and increasing the feeling of threat for the Belgians who, it will be recalled, had six active divisions and another six reserve divisions. Subsequent Franco-Belgian talks, also in Paris, on April 25, 1935, reached a further understanding that the French forces at Arlon

³⁰⁹ Devèze to Comte de Broqueville, October 14, 1934, p. 2, ARP-GVO 4 1934; note by the king regarding the choices for new Chief of Staff of the Army, ARP-GVO 4 1934; Wanty I: 166.

³¹⁰ Elite North African troops.

³¹¹ Wanty, I: 166.

would constitute the “eastern hinge of a defensive front on the Chiers [river] held by two divisions” while the French would hold the Sedan-Givet area (location of the eventual German 1940 breakthrough) with a motorized division, a cavalry division, and a brigade of *Spahis*. The French promised five divisions, of which two were motorized and one cavalry, to help the Belgians in the north. The Belgians would be oriented north-east and anchor their front on the PFL 2, the old belt of fortresses around Liège. “This latter signified the abandonment, as an army position, of the fortified system of the Herve plateau (PFL 1) and of the frontier pillboxes, the abandonment of Luxembourg. The Belgians would also have to make a new effort and fortify the line of the Meuse between Givet and Liège.” They would deploy one infantry division at Liège, one from Liège to Maastricht, and the rest (four divisions) on the Albert Canal while the reserve divisions could go to the frontier canals between Maastricht and Antwerp.³¹²

B. The Motorization of the Cavalry Corps

A major initiative of the Cumont period was the motorization of the Cavalry Corps. Several reasons impelled the Belgians to motorize their cavalry units. In the early and mid-1930s, Belgium was faced at the same time with a lack of immediately available horses, indeed of horses generally. The economic effects of the Great Depression also encouraged the replacement of costly horse units with cheaper motorized units. Belgian defensive plans required forces that could deploy quickly to a gap in the Belgian lines opposite Dutch Limburg in the event of a German invasion. Motorization would also increase the power of the Cavalry Corps. As well, Belgian armor enthusiasts, notably Major General (in 1940) Keyaerts, Colonel Raoul van Overstraeten, and Colonel

³¹²Wanty, I: 167; James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform* (Lawrence, KS: UP Kansas, 1992), p. 183; Crahay, p. 135.

B.E.M.³¹³ de Lannoy, recognized that World War I, at least on the Western Front, showed the obsolescence of horse cavalry units and the value of tanks and internal combustion engines. It should be kept in mind that armor theorists in other countries, especially Britain, France, Germany, and even Italy, were putting their ideas into practice so that the Belgian military was well informed about these efforts and felt it had to keep up.³¹⁴

Colonel van Overstraeten complained in an October 26, 1934 memo that the spin-off unit of the artillery of a cavalry division, “hitched up with all requisitioned horses, composed exclusively of reservists, will be, for long weeks, only a very mediocre horsed group.—[sic] And yet it is in the beginning of operations that the mission of the light troops is the most charged, in marches and in combats.” He would note in a diary entry for January 13, 1935 that “The General Staff notes, correctly, that our cavalry possesses in times of peace only 40% of its mounts for time of war; that requisition is no longer capable of furnishing the complement of suitable saddle horses. . . .” In a note to Albert Devèze, Lieutenant General Cumont responded to an earlier note by the commander of the Cavalry Corps, Lieutenant General van Strydonck³¹⁵ by arguing that “as far as the number, what is necessary will, in effect, be found, but I do not agree with the commander of the C.C. [sic] as to the immediate military value of these horses. . . .

Remember that before 1914 it was well admitted that a mounted unit of a D[ivision of] C[avalry] could not, in principle, be composed of requisitioned horses [because it would take too long to train them].” Colonel van Overstraeten noted that “the budgetary benefit

³¹³*Breveté Etat Major.*

³¹⁴ CDHFA, p. 44; Commandant e.r. Guy Stassin, “La Motorization de la Cavalerie Belge”, in *Cavalerie: Du Cheval au Moteur/ Van Paard tot Motor 1937-1997* [special edition of *Tank Museum News* (1997)]: 23-24; Colonel B.E.M. van Overstraeten “Avis & [sic] Considerations sur la motorization eventuelle des batteries a cheval,” dated 26 Octobre 1934, ARP-GVO 4 1934; Lt.Gen. Cumont, “Note pour Monsieur le Ministre [of National Defense]. Objet Motorisation des groupes à cheval de l’A/Ch,” dated 7 Novembre 1934, ARP-GVO 4 1934.

³¹⁵ Later to lead the Free Belgian forces during World War II.

would result from the substitution of 2 auto batteries for 2 horsed batteries.” He was backed up by Lieutenant General Cumont. In any case, as General Cumont pointed out, the money could be found because the motorization would allow the suppression of a Frontier Cyclist company, the cancellation of a proposed Frontier Cyclist company, and the cancellation of the proposed fortress of Sougnée-Remouchamps near Liège.³¹⁶

The motorization of the Cavalry Corps was also considered necessary for the creation of a “very mobile reserve” that could react to a sudden German invasion via Holland and thus cover the mobilization of the rest of the Belgian army. Lieutenant General Cumont pointed out that a reserve motorized group (such as for artillery) could mobilize more quickly than a horsed unit that had to train its horses to draw artillery. As to strategic mobility,” he wrote, “I do not think I have to insist; it suffices to compare the speeds of displacement and the stages that can be covered daily [by] the horse and the tractor.”³¹⁷

Advocates for motorization argued that the change (and the consequent reorganization of the Cavalry Corps) would make the corps more powerful. Lieutenant General Cumont noted that horse-drawn artillery units could not benefit from the increased range of the new 75mm cannons while “[f]or motorized groups, a light augmentation of weight is not susceptible to reduce mobility.” He did the math, comparing the contemporary Cavalry Corps of four cavalry regiments, four cyclist regiments, two armored car squadrons, and two batteries of 47mm anti-tank guns with the

³¹⁶Van Overstraeten, *Ibid.*, Van Overstraeten, p. 148; Chef d’Etat-Major General [Cumont], “Note pour Monsieur le Ministre,” dated 19 Decembre 1934, ARP-GVO 4 1935; *Ibid.*, 4^{ic^{me}} partie, p. 1; Van Overstraeten, 26 Oct. 1934 in ARP-GVO 4 1935; Lt.Gen. Cumont, dated 7 Novembre 1934, ARP-GVO 4 1935; Lt.Gen. Cumont, “Note pour Monsieur le Ministre [of National Defense],” dated 5 Février 1935, pp. 1-2-ARP-GVO 4 1935.; Stassin, p. 24.

³¹⁷ Crahay, p. 178; CDHFA, p. 44; Cumont to Devèze, “Note pour Monsieur le Ministre,” dated 7 Novembre 1934, ARP-GVO 4 1934, p.2.

projected Cavalry Corps of six cavalry regiments, four cyclist regiments, two “mounted” regiments, two motorcyclist groups, two armored car groups, and two groups of 47mm anti-tank guns. He found that the new arrangement resulted in the addition of 132 “*fusils-mitrailleurs* (Browning Automatic Rifles), 24 machine guns, 24 armored cars, and 24 anti-tank guns.”³¹⁸

Colonel van Overstraeten, “a decided and declared partisan, for a long time, of the motorization, and even the mechanization of units,”³¹⁹ notes in his diary entry for January 13, 1935, that “in imitation of the great motorized units that France and Germany are creating, our light troops must comprise automobile elements assuring them a firepower and a capacity for deployment of the same order.” Colonel B.E.M. de Lannoy went even further in a 1937 article in *L’Ordre*, advocating the creation of a Belgian armored (“*cuirassier*”) division. He notes that:

since the Great War, this tactic [of the employment of tanks] has evolved to such a point that it is correct that [French] colonel Lançon. . . estimates it necessary to revise the defensive conceptions issued from the battles of 1918. . . . We speak, in a word, then, of the necessity for us of being able to oppose, to this employment *en masse*, something else than a perfection of our defensive conception of a stopping battle, that is to say at least a *division of modern cuirassiers* [heavy cavalry]. . . . The *cuirassier division* that I recommend is the strict minimum that is suitable to constitute in order to permit our high command to win the time necessary for the arrival of the Allies’ great air, motorized, and mechanized units. [Emphasis in the original]

He was arguing that it was time to start thinking about the use of tanks in a defensive role as an instrument of counter-attack.

³¹⁸ Ibid.; 19 December 1934, 3^{ième} Partie, p. 7; Cdt. E.r. Guy Stassin, “Organisation,” in *Cavalerie: Du Cheval au Moteur/ Van Paard tot Motor 1937-1997*, p. 38.

³¹⁹ “Motorized” means using internal combustion engines while “mechanized,” in American military usage, means using tracked vehicles (as opposed to wheeled ones).

The most important supporter of motorization was King Leopold III himself, who, in his words, took “great interest because I judge it tightly tied to the good conduct of the defense of the country.”³²⁰

Not all Belgian military opinion was favorable to the motorization of the Cavalry Corps. Lieutenant General van Strydonck, who would later be praised by the king for his work transforming the Cavalry Corps, initially opposed such a transformation. In his confidential note to Minister Devèze dated December 8, 1934, he examined the arguments in favor of reorganizing the cavalry divisions, especially in favor of replacing cavalry units with truck-borne infantry and knocked down what he cited as the three main ones: the alleged crisis of the requisition of horses, the need for budgetary savings, and “the desire to be able to dispose immediately upon mobilization of the C[avalry] D[ivisions] maintained in some way on the war footing from time of peace.” He argued that the presidents of the Remount Committees had said there was no crisis in requisitioned horses and consequently “it thus does not seem there must be maintained great apprehensions on the subject of the number and of the *value* of the requisitioned horses and that it is, consequently, necessary to envisage a reduction of our cavalry units.” He opined that the replacement of cavalry units by truck-borne infantry would reduce the mobility of the light units “and yet *our regulations insist on the necessity of this mobility*” [emphasis in the original]. He concludes that “this adjunction of infantry, resolved in France by the constitution of the regiment of Mounted Dragoons, is in our case by the existence of our two cyclist regiments which suit better because of the

³²⁰ Van Overstraeten, 26 Octobre 1934, ARP-GVO 4 1934; Van Overstraeten, *Albert 1er-Leopold III*, p. 148; Colonel B.E.M. de Lannoy, “La motorization de la cavalerie,” *L’Ordre*, February 13, 1937, Fonds de Lannoy, Boite 3, doc. 11, Service Générale de Renseignements-Sécurité-Section/Archive [Henceforth “SGRS-S/A”]; Leopold III, March 2, 1935, quoted in Van Overstraeten, p. 154.

widespread use of the bicycle and of the presence of cycle-able tracks not only on our secondary routes but even on the length of our dirt roads.” However, Lieutenant General Cumont responded that:

The new units are not less mobile than the cavalry. . . nor than the Cy[clists]. . . . They are automobile transported and motorcycle units capable of more rapid and longer displacements than the cyclists. . . . The commandant of the C.C. indicates that the maneuvers at the Beverloo camp have established that our D.C. possess by their current organization this mobility of which the necessity is underlined by regulations. The argument is not peremptory precisely because the units on maneuvers in camp were weighed down neither by requisitioned horses nor by all their complements of mobilization.³²¹

The debate was also carried on in the military and civilian press. In *Belgique Militaire* in 1933, French Lieutenant Colonel Requette called Belgium “very late” in the motorization of its army compared to France and Britain. A 1934 article in the same publication comments on the recently concluded maneuvers of the Cavalry Corps and advocates “that all these auto-caissons and all these high trucks created for the route be suppressed and that our units be given low vehicles, tracked if possible, but able to pass everywhere!” Two 1935 articles by A. Lepère note that in the Beverloo maneuvers, “each time the motorcycles will find the uncovered flank and their rapidity of intervention will surprise the adversary” and “a motorcycle reconnaissance leaving at 0400 will reach the enemy position at dawn. . . , will infiltrate itself in all terrains in the rear. . . [sic] will reconnoiter the occupation of certain very important points and will send by motorcycle messenger the information that arrives.” A 1937 article that appeared in *La Dernière Heure* commented on the August maneuvers pitting the *Chasseurs ardennais* against

³²¹ King Leopold III to Minister of National Defense Devèze and Chief of Staff Cumont, ARP-GVO 4 1935; Le Commandant du Corps de Cavalerie A Monsieur le Ministre de la Défense Nationale (Chef d’Etat-major Général)/ Objet: Réorganisation des Grandes Unités de Cavalerie,” dated 8 décembre 1934, ARP-GVO 4 1934, pp. 2,3,7, emphasis in the original; Cumont, 19 Decembre 1934, ARP-GVO 4 1935, 4e partie, p. 2.

motorized units: “. . . these maneuvers have confirmed in the most striking fashion the value of cyclist and motorized troops. On this subject, it is comforting to see that these cavalymen. . . who have had, regretfully, it is conceived, to abandon the horse for the motorcycle or the armored tank, have become veritable ‘demons’ of the motor.”³²²

The leading literary opponent of motorization was Lieutenant General Peteau. He suggested that it was suitable for large countries like France and Germany to motorize but that it was not necessary for a small country such as Belgium, an argument that Major (at that time) B.E.M. Wanty would echo sixty years later, writing in retrospect as a retired general: “The time was not taken to ask oneself if an integral motorization, very expensive, responded to the strategic defensive needs of a country as small as ours, where the amplitude of movement could scarcely exceed 100km. We would have been able to have many fewer motorcycles and many more armored cars and tanks.” In an April 28, 1937 article in *La nation Belge*, Peteau declared that “there are. . . reasons, without doubt, in favor of the motorization, even integral, but there are excellent and numerous ones against a transformation of our light forces.” Among those he cited are the expense, public opinion, the opposition of

all the cavalry and a great majority of officers of all arms . . . against this extreme measure of the integral motorization of our light forces. . . . [And] Once the cavalry disappears, if war comes, . . . it would be impossible to recreate [the cavalry] and to have a great unit ready to enter into the field. For the other part, the disappearance of the cavalry will lead to the unavoidable and incurable blindness of the infantry.”³²³

³²²Stassin, “La motorization et les publications militaires,” in *Cavalerie: Du Cheval au Moteur/Van Paard tot Motor*, p. 93; Major Lecorbesier in *Belgique Militaire*, issue 2809, cited in *Ibid.*, A. Lepère, cited in *Ibid.*; “Leçons des grand manoeuvres,” *La Dernière Heure*, 1er Septembre 1937, cited in LtCol (Hre) Marcel Dion, “Et les Echos dans la presse civile” in *Cavalerie*, p. 97.

³²³Lieutenant general Peteau, cited in “La motorization et les publications militaires,” p. 93; Wanty, p. 163; Peteau, “Le Conseil Supérieur de la Défense Nationale et la Motorisation de la Cavalerie,” *La Nation Belge*, 28 Avril 1937, Fonds de Lannoy, Box 3, Document 11, #19.

Once the motorization was decided upon, it had to take place on two planes: the physical and the spiritual. Both were done gradually. Lieutenant General Cumont noted that “the experience [of] France has proved that the hardest evolution to realize in the transformations of great cavalry units was ‘the motorization of spirits.’ This evolution can only be obtained by the introduction of motorized units of new formation into the very heart of the cavalry units.” In other words, the cavalrymen had to stop thinking like *mounted* personnel and to start thinking like *motorized* personnel with entirely new potential or they would not get the most out of their new technology. As General van Overstraeten pointed out, “the handling of large rapid units requires a vigor and a rapidity of decision of which few generals are capable.” An example of the result of such a lack is the destruction of the numerically and, by some criteria, technologically, superior French armored units by the Germans in 1940—the French in general did not understand how to use their armored forces and they paid the price as their armored units were destroyed in detail with the more lightly armed German tanks maneuvering around the French tanks and hitting them in the more lightly armored flank or rear. It is very hard to change entrenched ways of thought, especially when the old ways have centuries of knightly glamour and tradition behind them. The change would take time and effort. For this reason, the reorganization and motorization of the Cavalry Corps proceeded by stages. The units to be motorized were the six regiments of cavalry, the artillery, cyclists, support units, the brigade of mounted cavaliers, and the anti-aircraft and armored car squadrons.³²⁴

³²⁴ Cumont to Monsieur le Ministre, 2 Mars 1935, p. 1 in ARP-GVO 1935A; van Overstraeten, diary entry for April 12, 1938, pp. 281-2; Stassin, “Organisation,” pp. 38-9.

The first stage was timed to coincide with the incorporation of the 1935 class of militia and took place on May 1 of that year. Each of the two cavalry divisions would have two regiments transformed into “mixed groups” with one horsed group and one motorized group. These regiments were the Second and Third Lancers of the First Cavalry Division and the First Lancers and the First *Chasseurs à Cheval* of the Second Cavalry Division. The latter division was the first to undergo the change. The First and Third Lancers and the First *Chasseurs à Cheval* were deployed along the German border (the First Lancers) and the Dutch border (The Third Lancers and First *Chasseurs à Cheval*). From July 31, 1935, volunteers and reenlisting NCOs were aggressively recruited into the cavalry regiments “in order to permit the formation of an important nucleus of long-service troops.”³²⁵

Meanwhile, the cavalry school at Brasschaet reduced its equitation courses to one hour per day and replaced them with courses on mechanized devices and the use of the 47mm anti-tank gun as well as one for “engineer artificers.” Future officer mechanics took a three-month course on automobiles at Borsbeek, near Antwerp. In 1936 the Parliamentary/military Mixed Commission recommended an increase in the service time of cavalymen to 17 months in order to keep the highly-trained troops with the colors longer. That same year the First Guides and Second *Chasseurs à Cheval* became mixed units while in 1937 the Second Lancers became mixed while the Third Lancers and the artillery of the Cavalry Corps were totally motorized. On January 15, 1938 the First Guides of the First Cavalry Division and the Second *Chasseurs à Cheval* of the Second Cavalry Division became completely motorized, followed by the First and Third Lancers on February 15. On March 15, 1938, the First *Chasseurs à Cheval* and the Second

³²⁵ Stassin, “Organisation,” p. 39.

Lancers lost their last horses, becoming “*Régiments Motocyclistes*.” A fully mobilized *Régiment Motocycliste* consisted of 49 officers, 105 senior NCOs, and 1160 corporals and cavalrymen. In addition, on a war footing, two regiments of infantry transported in trucks would be raised from reservists.³²⁶

In his evaluation of the Belgian August 1938 maneuvers, British military attaché in Brussels, Major D. K. Paris, noted that the advance of two infantry divisions “was delayed by the mechanized 1st Cavalry Division. . . . A flank attack by the Mechanised Cavalry Division, the approach march for which was carried out by night with all lights out, was particularly well executed.” In his 1938 annual report, Major Paris also pointed out that “their peace organization closely resembles their war organization. . . . The covering force is now organized so that it can be at its war stations, at peace strength, in under 3 hours.” In October 1939 the German general staff rated the Cavalry Corps as “good but not very consistent.” From hindsight, Belgian lieutenant general Albert Crahay evaluates the Cavalry Corps as “possess[ing] thus an excellent strategic mobility and a good defensive potential, but its offensive capacity remained reduced, by lack of tanks and of all-terrain transported infantry” and Emile Wanty calls the Cavalry Corps “a great step forward in the way to modernization, . . . powerfully armed, strongly trained. . . , rapid, with great facility for movement.”³²⁷

The Belgian Army had dissolved its *Corps des Chars de Combat* on March 1, 1935, handing its last worn-out World War I surplus French FT-17 tanks over to the *Gendarmerie* (the Belgian national police force) to use on striking workers. It was also felt that the Belgian Army, having a purely defensive role, had no reason to have armored

³²⁶ Stassin, “Organisation,” pp. 38-39, 44-45.

³²⁷ Major Paris, Annual Report on the Belgian Army for 1938, MRA-AMB 80/3/, pp 333-4, 337-8; Crahay, pp. 164-5, 179; Wanty, I:163.

units, which were considered offensive weapons. The focus shifted to anti-tank weapons instead. However, the squadrons of armored cars called for in the organization of the new motorized cavalry regiments called for four cannon-armed vehicles per group (two groups to a regiment), or 16 for the first four mixed regiments. In December 1934, the eyes of the Belgian general staff fell on the French Renault AMC/AMR Modèle 1933, also being evaluated by the French army, which found it lacking.³²⁸

The next year, Renault came up with a new design, the AMC Modèle 1935 R type ACG-1. Renault was so excited by the new design that it started production before the military trials, in which the French decided to go with a design by Somua, had ended. Meanwhile, the Belgian delegation had ordered twenty-five weaponless turrets from the Puteaux Company, which were delivered by 1936. Renault tried to sell its design to the Belgians, who ordered twelve chassis, to be delivered starting in 1937. The first example was hastily turreted and armed and sent to the August maneuvers of the *Chasseurs ardennais*, but Lieutenant General Pire felt it was unsuitable for operations in the Ardennes. It was sent to the garage of the Second Lancers. The politicians found out about the tank and “showed themselves hostile to the acquisition of other machines as offensive, which happened to be of French provenance while the country had adopted a policy of strict neutrality.” Lieutenant General Denis, the minister of national defense, cancelled the delivery in January 1938, after nine had arrived and had been sent to Ghent to be provided with turrets. They were abandoned there until 1939.³²⁹

³²⁸Raymond Surlémond, “Le Regiment des Chars de Combat (1920-1935)” in *Cavalerie*, p. 60; Stassin, “Motorisation,” p. 34; Commandant e.r. M. Van den ???, “Les Chars de Combat Renault ACG-1,” p. 1, Chars de Combat 1920-1940, SGRS-S/A.

³²⁹Cdt. M. Van den ????, pp. 1-2.

In September 1939, the Squadron C 4,7/T-13 of the Brigade of Mounted Cavalrymen was formed under Captain Hullebroeck. On September 11, it went to direct corps command as the *escadron d'autos blindées du Corps de Cavalerie* ("Armored Car Squadron of the Cavalry Corps") Upon the discovery that there were no T-13s with which to equip them, somebody remembered the Renaults rusting away in Ghent, where they had been left outside for over a year and a half. Eight were put into working order and the crews were trained. When war came to Belgium in May, 1940, these tanks, in two platoons, were misused in the hunt for paratroopers until May 16 when they went into action with the First Light Regiment in the defense of the Willebroek canal, where one was lost, or provided anti-tank defense of bridges. On May 19, the Squadron, now under the Second Cavalry Division, having lost one tank en route due to running out of gas, participated in a counterattack aiming at the town of Zwijndrecht, where one was destroyed. The next day, two more tanks were knocked out in a counterattack at Kwatrecht while two were being repaired. By May 22, only three were left to fight and they participated in the battle of the Lys.³³⁰

As for the Cavalry Corps itself, its constituent units went on to distinguish themselves during the Eighteen-Days campaign, especially on the Gette river, where on May 13 the First Guides, Second Carabiniers Cyclists, and the Second *Chasseurs à Cheval*, with French help, repulsed the German forces, and on the Lys river, where, in the last desperate fighting, the First and Second Lancers and others attached to the Second Cavalry Division stopped the Germans cold on May 26 and the First and Third Lancers and Second *Chasseurs à Cheval* continued fighting until the capitulation. After the war,

³³⁰ Cdt. M. Van den ????, p. 3; "L'Armée belge et les blindés," A.S.B.L. Tank Museum, Bruxelles; de Fabribeckers, *La Campagne de l'armée belge en 1940*, 2nd ed., (Bruxelles: Rossel, ND), pp. 259, 274.

to reward their valor, The First Lancers, First *Chasseurs à Cheval*³³¹, Second *Chasseurs à Cheval*, and the Third and Fourth Lancers added “La Gette” to their regimental standards while the Second *Chasseurs à Cheval*, First, Second, Third, and Fourth Lancers added “La Lys.” The Fourth Lancers also added “Zwijndrecht.” General Wanty notes that “the motorized cavalry corps, in the beginning stupidly fragmented and deployed, wholly fulfilled its duty.”³³²

Meanwhile, the Belgians were also working on their defenses against the new weapons of war—tanks and planes. The Belgian 47mm anti-tank gun was the best in Europe and capable of destroying any German tank of the day. It appeared while the FT-17s were approaching their last gasp as military machines. A solution to the thorny political problem of tanks arose: eliminate the tanks and replace them with anti-tank guns—weapons indisputably defensive. This was an advantage because large and important sectors of the population believed that, since the Belgian army’s role was to be exclusively the defense of its territory, it was inappropriate for the Belgian army to have any “offensive” weapons. “Offensive” weapons might also offend the Germans. This mindset resulted in the limitation of the size of the main guns of the Belgian super-fort of Eben Emael to make sure the guns lacked the range to hit targets outside of Belgium. In 1934 the corps of anti-tank arms and accompaniment was created and each army corps was given one battery from this corps starting in May 1935. In 1936 each infantry division would receive a weapons battalion and the next year this battalion was provided

³³¹ Later renamed the First *Jagers te Paard* when it changed linguistic regime.

³³² Historique 1 Regiment Jagers te Paard, Historique 2 Jagers te Paard, Historique du 4ème Chasseurs à Cheval, Historique de 1er Régiment de Lanciers, Historique 2de Regiment Lansiers, Historique du 3ème Régiment de Lanciers, Historique 4de Lansiers in <http://WWW.mil.be/armycomp/units.html>; De Fabribeckers, pp. 225, 333,335; Wanty, II, p. 268.

at the regimental level while the *Chasseurs ardennais* and the Cavalry Corps also were allocated these guns.³³³

Anti-aircraft artillery (“AAA”) came of age at the same time its target did and Belgium left World War I with an AAA group attached to the First Regiment of Heavy Artillery. Five years later, the Fourth Regiment of Army Artillery became the *regiment de defense terrestre contre objectifs aériens* (“Regiment of Ground Defense against Aerial Objectives.”). In 1926 a unified command joining AAA and airplanes was formed while in 1928 it was un-formed in favor of an *Etat-Major de defense terrestre contre aéronefs* (“DTCA” or “Headquarters of Terrestrial Defense against Aircraft”). In 1934 the DTCA was joined with the air force into the *Défense aérienne du territoire* (“DAT” or “Aerial Ground Defense”) and a second regiment of DTCA was raised while the guns were modernized.³³⁴

At the end of September 1935, General Cumont was forced to retire, having reached the statutory age. He was replaced by Lieutenant General Edouard Van den Bergen, whose main concern was for the effective coverage of Belgian territory in order to buy time for the rest of the army to mobilize undisturbed by the enemy. His plan, offered even before he was named chief of staff, called for the creation in each division of a “provisional battalion” that would spend four months with trained troops on the proposed covering line. This was very important because the Belgian commanders were afraid of a sudden German attack from a standing start with no preliminary period of international tension or an ultimatum as the Germans gave them in 1914. If there were not enough trained troops to stop the Germans the Germans could disrupt Belgian

³³³ CDHFA, p. 46; René Vliegen, *Fort Eben-Emael*, Fifth improved English ed. (NL: Wagelmans-Vise, ND), p. 12 .

³³⁴ CDHFA, p. 47.

mobilization and win a quick victory. Van den Bergen's plan met with the approval of Minister Devèze among others, including the commander of the D.A.T., Major General Duvivier, who testified before the 1936 Mixed Commission that the plan had the advantage that: "[t]he covering troops, composed of trained men, are completely independent of the field army, they are in place from peacetime and at all times. They are ready to intervene at any moment and with minimal delay. They keep watch." The provisional battalions would also simplify the peacetime training of draftees at a safe distance from the frontier. The conception ran into the resolute opposition of Raoul van Overstraeten, who complained in his diary that the provisional battalions would not bring any real security and would complicate mobilization by removing the trained troops, it would ruin the *esprit de corps* by removing familiar officers to fully staff the provisional battalions, and the result of keeping small units on guard in small garrisons would be a diminishing of "tactical instruction, discipline, and morale." In addition, the Belgian army already lacked enough trained officers and NCOs and it would destroy the organic structure of the units based on "keeping the men constantly at the orders of the same chiefs." Van Overstraeten describes an October, 1935 meeting with General Van den Bergen (already chief of staff):

I explain in detail my. . . [ideas about] the provisional battalions, and the Cavalry Corps, and the garrisons. But I perceive very quickly that the general and I, we do not understand each other. He sees security and solidity there where I find only dislocation and dispersal. He disorganizes where I want to reinforce. The conceptions are irreconcilable.

The king listened to van Overstraeten and to Prime Minister van Zeeland and rejected General Van den Bergen's plan because it would disturb the public.³³⁵

As we have seen, Albert Devèze had a strong influence on the Belgian Army. His policy of defense at the frontier won out against defense in depth. Two units, the *Chasseurs ardennais* and the motorized Cavalry Corps, were created which would impress the Germans before and during the war. The Belgian Army also focused its attention on defense against the new threats of tanks and airplanes.

III. Defense for a policy of "Independence"

A. 1936

The years 1936 to 1940 saw mostly incremental changes in the Belgian Army as the Belgians accelerated programs, such as the development of the *Chasseurs ardennais*, the motorization of the Cavalry Corps, and the acquisition of anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, in the face of a rapidly rearming and increasingly belligerent Germany. However, as we have seen in chapter 4, the Army was placed in a new position by the changing European situation, especially in the watershed year of 1936, and would see some of its energy and manpower siphoned off for a defense against a French attack few Belgian generals took seriously.

The year 1936 saw four events that would greatly shape the Belgian Army in the years before the German invasion: the German reoccupation of the Rhineland, the meeting of the parliamentary/military Mixed Commission, the resignation of Albert

³³⁵ Wanty, I: 167; Duvivier to Van den Bergen, 18 Juillet 1936, p. 1, in MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), subfolder "Documentation"; diary entry for August 10, 1935 in van Overstraeten, pp. 169-70; diary entry for October 11, 1935 in *Ibid.*, p. 177.

Devèze as Minister of National Defense, and the declaration of Belgian “independence” from obligations imposed by the League of Nations and Locarno. On March 7, 1936, 30,000 German soldiers marched into the Rhineland, a part of Germany along the Dutch, Belgian, Luxembourg, and French borders from which German soldiers had been prohibited by the Treaty of Versailles. This brought the German *Wehrmacht* much closer to the Belgian defenses and increased the risk to the Belgians of a surprise German attack because the Belgians would have less time to prepare. Raoul van Overstraeten notes in his diary that

if the [Franco-Czech-Soviet] alliance has for the object to strangle Germany at little price, no occasion will better present itself than the crisis of [French] military reorganization where it is debated. Besides, a preventive war has never been as easy to justify. Germany took the initiative to break the Pact of Locarno; France has thus the right to send its armies into the Rhineland; England and Belgium can only approve it, if not march at its side.

It would not have been hard to drive the Germans back out of the Rhineland but resolute action was not the forte of the Anglo-French. On March 10, French Generalissimo Maurice Gamelin declared himself ready to advance into Germany *via* Belgium but complained that the Belgians would not let him in. The next day, Devèze and Van den Bergen proposed forming the provisional battalions and summoning the Superior Defense Council while Gamelin was lowering his aims. The day after that, Gamelin approached the Belgian military attaché in Paris for permission to send troops into Belgium. The response was a question: “What will the French divisions do in Belgium while the Reich, with its embryo of an army, would have great difficulty in defending itself?” Emile Wanty declares “*it has been noticed, since then, that all this March affair was led on the French side with neither conviction nor energy*” [my emphasis] while a resolute French

military action in the days just after the German remilitarization would, by the Locarno Pact, draw the Belgians and British into the French “police action.” As Wanty points out, “[a] *unique occasion to stop the Hitlerian peril dead, at less price, was wasted in these historic hours, by the hesitation of some, the reticence of others, the mediocrity of all before the events of which the scale had already overtaken them* [my emphasis].” The present historian has to agree with this judgment. Not to put all the blame on the French, General Wanty points out that a Belgian offensive would have gone against everything the general staff had advocated: its opposition to the forward deployment of covering forces (i.e. defense at the frontier) and to “the dispersion of forces on the Herve plateau.” The results of the successful German action were to reveal as inert (if not inept) and weak the British and French, to show as useless the international agreements guaranteeing Belgium’s status, to kick the props out from under Minister Devèze’s cherished concept of defense at the frontier, in part leading to his resignation, and to dramatically change the situation in Western Europe. It also undoubtedly elated many Germans but in the context of this study that is neither here nor there.³³⁶

In the short term there was an increase in staff talks between the Belgians, British, and French, but nothing much was accomplished. On May 15, General Van den Bergen, accompanied by his second in command, General Deffontaine, and the Belgian military attaché to France, Lieutenant-Colonel Raquez, went again to Paris, where he met with important officials, including General Bineau, who would command the French troops intervening in Belgium, Generalissimo Gamelin, and the commanders of the French navy and air force. They agreed that the Franco-Belgian limit would be Havelange-Godinne,

³³⁶ Diary entry for March 7, 1935 in van Overstraeten, p. 202; Wanty, I:168-169; quoted in *ibid*, p. 168; CDHFA, p. 51.

Mettet-Thuin, the Sambre river, Maubeuge-Givet (inclusive) and, at Van den Bergen's request, extending from Spa to Baraque Michel in the east so as to incorporate advanced Belgian forces. The French would take command once the French cavalry linked up with the *Chasseurs ardennais*, after which the latter would withdraw to join the bulk of the army and defend the southern flank of the PFL on the Ourthe River.³³⁷

The Belgians would hold the Albert Canal and Liège. Belgian troops south of the Meuse, including the *Chasseurs ardennais*, would come under the commander of the TDLN until the French arrived. The French First Army would arrive in Belgium after a day's delay and deploy in the Brussels-Nivelles-Wavre-Namur region to face Germans coming from Hasselt or crossing the Meuse. General Van den Bergen promised concrete field works along a line from Antwerp to Namur at need. The French guaranteed the number of large units intervening until October 15, 1936, after which "certain modifications will be brought." They also recommended a Belgian rear position on the Scheldt River and through Deynze, Renaix, Condé, and Maubeuge. General Van den Bergen informed the French that the Albert Canal, expected to be the main Belgian defensive position, would be completed in 1938 but the Belgians would also have an advanced position on the frontier canals that would hold long enough for the Albert Canal to be manned. The Belgian forts on the Herve plateau (PFL 1), comprising a 60km perimeter far exceeding the ability of two divisions to adequately garrison, would be defended as "isolated works" with the main Belgian resistance based on the older PFL 2. If, as the Belgians and French judged unlikely, the Germans respected Dutch neutrality,

³³⁷ Crahay, p. 182; Wanty, I:169; "Observations Militaires Franco-Belges du 15 Mai 1936: Proces-Verbal", SGRS-S/A "Campagne 1940"/Généralités G1 A-1-26, pp. 1-4.

the forces in the north would be sent south to PFL 2 and the Meuse. These 1936 open staff talks were the last until the German invasion on May 10, 1940.³³⁸

The remilitarization of the Rhineland, by increasing the German threat to Belgium, also triggered the March 25, 1936 royal order creating a Mixed Commission, whose work was examined in detail in chapter 3. The work of the commission allowed the establishment of General Van den Bergen's cherished provisional battalions by extending the term of infantrymen (except machine-gunners) to eighteen months. It was considered it would take six months to properly train a soldier, so with eighteen months service, there would be two classes of trained draftees under arms for six months, enough to provide for the battalions. Money was allotted to pay long-service volunteers to man some of the covering units.

Money was also found to equip and organize the reserve divisions (numbers seven to twelve), which now became "first reserve" divisions, identically to the active divisions. As Lieutenant General De Grox noted to the commission, "It will serve nothing to equip the I[nfantry] D[ivisions] of the 2nd reserve if the field army, which will have to enter into operations from the first hour, is not equipped in a fashion to be able to struggle with chances of success against the eventual aggressor." Part of this process involved dividing the active officers equally between the active and first reserve divisions to make the two interchangeable. The result was, according to General van Overstraeten, to have "65-75%" of regimental officers reservists without any "aptitude to command." Starting from 1936, reservists would be called up for one period of sixteen days, rather than two periods of eight days, during which entire divisions would be called up and trained in

³³⁸ Crahay, p. 182; Wanty, I:169; "Observations Militaires Franco-Belges du 15 Mai 1936: Proces-Verbal", pp. 5-7; *Relations militaires franco-belges*, cited in Crahay, p. 182.

exercises from battalion to division scale. With two divisions being trained per year, it would take until 1938 for the full effect to be felt. Six new “second reserve” divisions, equivalent to the French “Class B” reservists, were raised (numbers 13 to eighteen) and equipped with the cast-off weapons of the first reserve divisions, including the virtually universally detested First World War French Chauchat light machine guns, modified by the Belgians in 1930 (the FM 15-30), the ancient Colt machine guns, and old grenade launchers. These divisions lacked anti-tank guns and had only one artillery group. Most of their officers and NCOs were from the reserve, although some had to be drawn from active units, thus aggravating the already serious lack of active and reserve cadres. The senior officers were reservists or retired. The second reserve divisions were initially assigned to the defense of Antwerp and Ghent although they would be mobilized and used like active units in 1939-'40 “with deplorable results due to their antiquated armament and to their deficient staffing.”³³⁹

Albert Devèze resigned as Minister of National Defense in May of 1936, before the Mixed Commission had completed its work, in the wake of the collapse of his policy of “integral defense of the territory.” General Van Overstraeten described a meeting with Devèze on March 11 of that year: “I return to M. Devèze at 18 hours. He is very tired and visibly thinks only of elections [to be held on May 24].” After the election, Devèze declared he would not accept a position in the new government. “In view of the importance of the military situation, he wants to preserve his full liberty of speech and of action in order to defend the ideas which are dear to him.—This decision is approved.”

³³⁹ Crahay, pp. 176-8; Lieutenant General De Grox, “Propositions & remarques relatives au ‘Projet de Textes de Resolutions à proposer à la Commission Mixte,” p. 1, in MRA-BAFM 5448 (185-14a-6983), *sous-farde* “Suggestions”; van Overstraeten, diary entry for May 9, 1937, p. 260; CDHFA, pp. 51, 54; *Rapport annuel 1936 [by] Major Paris* [in English], p. 41, MRA-AMB 80/3/XIII.

Devèze was replaced on June 15 not with a politician, but with a “technician,” Lieutenant General Denis, an artilleryman who had commanded the III Army Corps and “one of our most cultivated and most independent generals.”³⁴⁰

In addition to the Mixed Commission, 1936 saw two other commissions: one charged with rewriting the main Belgian regulations, *l’Instruction Provisoire sur l’Emploi des grandes unités* (“Provisional Instruction on the use of large units”) and the “*Règlement sur le Service en Campagne*” (“Regulation on Field Service”) and the other charged with rewriting the rules on defense against tanks. “The commission is a specifically Belgian institution; it is resorted to each time a difficult problem is posed; responsibilities are drowned there; it is constituted in such a manner that constructive work, and above all, rapid [work], is impossible.”³⁴¹

The discussions of the first committee, made necessary by the motorization of the Cavalry Corps and the evolution of tank and airborne warfare in foreign armies since the last commission in 1926-1927, lasted almost a year and were dominated by General Van Overstraeten. Progress was made in clarifying the defense of extended fronts and the conduct of retreats as well as in providing artillery support to forward units and in giving greater emphasis to counterattacks. The commission gave much emphasis to defense against tanks and air attacks although the majority was skeptical about the effective use of paratroopers. “In brief, if there was real progress, for all that, the new regulations were not strongly changed in their spirit; this latter remained prudent, methodical, formal, not formally excluding [overreliance on] formulae.” The other commission broke new

³⁴⁰ CDHFA, p. 51; diary entry for March 11, 1936 in Van Overstraeten, p. 206; Jean Vanwelkenhuyzen, *1936: Leopold III, Degrelle, van Zeeland et les autres...* (Brussels: Racine, 2004), p. 11; The President of the Chamber quoted in *ibid.*, p. 47; Crahay, p. 172.

³⁴¹ Wanty, I: 175.

ground and “the regulation that it left was very honorable.” It emphasized the use of terrain “to support a position” and “enunciated the principles and the procedures of passive defense and active defense.” This defense would rely on the Belgian-made 47mm anti-tank gun which had excellent armor penetration but a low rate of fire—only seven or eight rounds per minute—and low range. It was also difficult to put into firing condition or, more importantly, to take it back out again. It was lost if it engaged the enemy and its crew were on foot. These drawbacks were rectified in the development of the T-13, although there was a desperate lack of these—only twelve of the sixty supposed to equip infantry divisions 1-12 existed—and those that existed were forced in 1940 to assume roles, such as supporting counter-attacks for which they were not designed.³⁴²

Also in 1936, each infantry regiment was given a weapons battalion consisting of a company of twelve 47mm anti-tank guns, a company of machine guns, and a battery of 76mm mortars while the divisional machine gun battalions and divisional mortar batteries were eliminated. General De Grox urged “supplementing” the Belgian Army’s anti-tank weapons as a measure

of capital importance and of completely first priority, taking into account:

- a) of the mechanization and motorization of the German Army, of the fearful power of this army in armored vehicles of all natures from reconnaissance vehicles to heavy tanks.
- b) of the necessities of *coverage*, exposed in particular to attacks by more or less armored all-terrain vehicles.
- c) of the *defensive* role which is the only one to foresee for our army, at least at the beginning of operations.

General De Grox also emphasized the role of heavy machine gun units not only in defending against “low-flying aircraft, but also against lightly-armored vehicles. . . .

These same arms can also be suitable for firing against aiming instruments of more

³⁴² Wanty, I:175-7.

powerful tanks. Their existence would complete the anti-tank defense furnished by the 47[mm] cannons, arms reserved, in principle, for fire against more strongly armored vehicles.”³⁴³

On October 14, 1936, Leopold made his famous speech declaring “independence” or “free hands,” essentially neutrality in any French or German conflicts, but having for the military the effect of closing off open staff talks (information would still be exchanged via the military attaches of France, Britain, and Belgium). In one 1939 incident the Belgians scrapped a planned meeting with a visiting British Military Intelligence officer *after he had already arrived in Brussels*. The explanation from the Belgian military attaché in London was that the visit had become a matter for gossip and the leading Belgians did not want the fact of the meeting getting to the Germans. British ambassador Clive’s reaction was that “I have met General Vinçotte once or twice and thought he was an ass, but I imagined only a Japanese was capable of making excuses like [the above].” The declaration also forced the Belgian Army to plan defenses on the French front. Now the Belgian Army had to become strong enough to deter *any* of its neighbors from attacking it³⁴⁴

B. Defenses against France

As we saw in chapters 3 and 4, in 1936, in the face of domestic considerations and the changing international situation, the Belgian government had renounced its foreign military ties under a 1920 Franco-Belgian Agreement and its obligations under the 1925 Locarno Pact. The new policy was to be one of strict independence and “armed neutrality.” In other words, Belgium was not to be seen as favoring one of its neighbors

³⁴³ Crahay, p. 179; De Grox, “Propositions & Remarques,” p. 1.

³⁴⁴ Sir Robert Clive to I.A. Kirkpatrick, 7th July 1939, MRA-AMB 80/4, p. 101; CDHFA, p. 53.

over the others. This policy satisfied the Flemish majority of the population, which distrusted France, as well as the many Belgians who resented French diplomatic behavior. It allayed the fears of the Socialists, who were opposed to military spending lest it bring Belgium into a war. These two groups then supported a major expansion and rearmament of the Belgian military. Neutrality also pleased King Leopold III who, unlike many generals, actually believed in such a policy.³⁴⁵ Many Belgians believed neutrality offered Belgium its best chance of staying out of the Western European war looming on the horizon by allowing its army to make itself a true deterrent and by giving no justification for invasion. Thus, the Belgian policy of “armed neutrality” had the paradoxical effect of forcing the Belgian Army to defend its border with France in order to stave off the German threat.

Anybody making any kind of policy in Belgium in the 1930s had to contend with the “Flemish Question.” The Flemish generally distrusted the French and were happy there would finally be defenses against them. The occasionally rocky relations with the French also factored into Belgian policy and made the severance of overt ties more acceptable. The less-than-stellar French diplomacy was not helped by the inopportune comments of Marshal Henri Pétain who, twice in the early 1930s, told the Belgian ambassador to France that Belgium would inevitably become involved in a Franco-German war and that the French army could be forced to enter Belgium without prior

³⁴⁵ British ambassador to Belgium Robert Clive to I.A. Kirkpatrick, July 7, 1939, *Musée Royale de l'Armée et d'Histoire Militaire-Centre de Documentation Historique*, Archive of the *Attachés Militaires Britanniques*, [henceforth “MRA-AMB”] box 80/4, p 103.

consultation with Brussels. Indeed, the marshal noted, it might be forced to do so against the will of the Belgian government.³⁴⁶

The policy of neutrality was very popular among the Flemings and the socialists and was a key factor in getting enough support to pass the December 1936 defense bill that started Belgian rearmament.³⁴⁷

The most important military consequence of the new policy was, as urged by the 1936 Mixed Commission, to avoid the appearance of preparing a defense more against one neighbor than the other.³⁴⁸ In late 1936, Hermann Göring informed the Belgian ambassador to Berlin:

We consider your desire of independence in the sense of a will of neutrality. . . . But the discourse of your sovereign has been followed by ministerial declarations showing that the military accords with France still subsist. . . . If it should remain thus in the future, if Belgium should continue to be the prolongation of the French military system. . . we would have to take account of that in that which concerns our own military plans and fortify ad hoc our positions before your frontier.

The Germans were watching and, for that matter, threatening.³⁴⁹

The Belgian generals, despite considering a French invasion “not. . . to be likely,” set about using some of their forces to create defenses facing France, work described by a senior Belgian general as “a purely political move.”³⁵⁰

³⁴⁶ Kieft, p. 12 and Marshal Philippe Pétain, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁴⁷ Jane Kathryn Miller, *Belgian Foreign Policy Between the Wars 1919-1940* (NY: Bookman, 1951), p. 247.

³⁴⁸ Quoted in Crahay, pp. 176-7

³⁴⁹ Göring to Viscount Davignon, Saturday before Nov. 30, 1936 in Royal Archives XV/3 #74, pp. 2-3. In March, 1940, the German ambassador complained about Belgian defenses aimed east while the French border was “nearly defenseless.” Report to Joachim Von Ribbentrop, March 21, 1940, quoted in Jean Vanwelkenhuyzen, “Un intéressant témoignage sur la neutralité belge de 1939-1940” in *L’Armée-La nation* 11:5 (May 1, 1956), pp. 6-7 and ff. British ambassador to Belgium Robert Clive to I.A. Kirkpatrick, July 7, 1939, MRA-AMB 80/4, p 103.

³⁵⁰ LTC Paris to Ambassador Clive, MRA-AMB 80/3/XIII, p. 21 (doc. Page 2); *Ibid.*, p. 152 (doc. P. 2).

Following the report of the Mixed Commission and the official declaration of the policy of independence, the king ordered the general staff to examine and prepare plans for the relocation of army supplies further away from France. However, the project was cancelled several months later, due to lack of funds. In 1937, while still concentrating its defenses towards the north-east [i.e. towards Germany], the king's military cabinet revisited the idea of a national redoubt, centered on Ghent and Antwerp, that could be defended against the French as well as the Germans.

In 1938, Flemish deputies succeeded in getting the government to commit to preparing a defense to the south as well as to the east while the government took care to show itself ready to defend the country in both directions. The defense line facing south and covering Brussels was based on a line connecting Ninove, Castre, Hal, and Waterloo as well as the Ghent bridgehead. In order to test and study the proposed defensive positions, maneuvers were carried out on March 22, 1938, when the Cavalry Corps and the 6th DI (infantry division) occupied covering positions between the Dendre and Senne rivers, and again on April 12 when they covered the area between the Senne and Dyle rivers. That July, the Cavalry Corps moved from its camp in Beverloo to Renaix-Audenarde, officially to show its mobility. British military attaché Lieutenant Colonel Paris commented that the move was taken as implying “an intervention towards the south frontier.” In August, the Belgian army held a three-division exercise in the region of Spa. LTC Paris noted, “the choice of the ground for the manoeuvres gave rise, amongst the extreme Walloon element, to certain statements that they were in the nature of a rehearsal to withstand a possible attack from France. Nothing is further from the truth.” Yet these maneuvers aroused controversy as the burgomaster of Liège, M. Neujean, in France to

attend an international exposition, called for the people of Spa to protest by flying French flags during the maneuvers. This suggestion, however, drew criticism from the leading French-language Belgian papers. The *Gazette* declared “Whatever the sentiments one can feel in these circumstances, whatever one thinks of the insistence with which we demonstrate to the French that we are ready for them, the presence of the King [who is expected at the maneuvers], the respect for the monarchical idea, impose the general flying exclusively of the Belgian colors.” The *Vingtième Siècle* called the suggestion “regrettable and uncalled for.”³⁵¹

When the Sudeten crisis broke out, the King, fearing a French invasion aimed at helping the Czechs, urged the acceleration of defensive measures aimed south. The Belgian Army was mobilized to the condition of *pied de paix renforcé* (PPR-“reinforced peace footing”) on September 27, 1938. LTC Paris reported that “[a]t no time did the General Staff seriously anticipate that the French would seek to come through Belgium, but large portions of the population thought this to be quite likely. The concentrations on the southern frontier were, however, ordered to satisfy the political creed of absolute independence.” The army was demobilized on September 30. The mobilization, and especially the demobilization, had been less than a total success. The annual report of the 12th Line Infantry Regiment of the 3rd Infantry Division noted “[n]obody is ignorant of [the fact that] from the points of view of organization and discipline, the PPR was far

³⁵¹ Renouvin, et al. pp. 31,33; Crahay, p. 187; E. Wanty, “Les relations militaires franco-belges, 1936-October 1939,” *Revue d’histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale* 31 (Juillet, 1958), pp. 14-15; LTC Paris to the British Chargé d’Affaires in Brussels, MRA-AMB 80/3/XIII, p. 151; “Discours de M. Neujean, bourgmestre de Liège,” *Le Soir*, 5-8-38, AMBAE 11185/1; *Gazette* and *Vingtième Siècle* quoted in *Libre Belgique* 7 août 1938, AMBAE 11185/1.

from being a success.” However, lessons were learned and the 1939 mobilization went much more smoothly.³⁵²

In light of the rising tensions over Danzig, the Belgian Army began its mobilization on August 24, 1939 with the cancellation of leaves and the recall of soldiers on furlough. The general staff mobilized on August 26, Leopold announced he was taking command of the army on September 4, and the last reservists were called up on November 22 of that year. Two thirds of the troops were initially deployed facing south, not because of any threat, but to reassure the Flemish that Paris was not dictating Belgian policy. However, with the fall of Warsaw and the increase of the German threat relative to the Anglo-French one, the Belgian general staff reoriented the vast majority of its troops to face east, where they would remain, with one exception, until May 10, 1940³⁵³

A recent study of the Belgian defenses facing south suggests that the Belgians may have planned to defend part of their country without impeding a French drive into Germany through the Ardennes, keeping the Belgian army out of France’s way, and that had the Belgians been serious about preventing any French incursion the Belgian army would have been oriented to the *southwest*.³⁵⁴

³⁵² Wanty, p. 15; CDH, p. 56; LTC Paris, “Annual Report on the Belgian Army” (1938) MRA-AMB 80/3/XIII, p. 336 ; CDH, p. 56; Service General de Renseignements-Sécurité-Section Archive [henceforth SGRS-SA], Box P.P.R., sub-folder 3DI, “12e de ligne” p. 517; Crahay, p. 189. Crahay calls the mobilization of 1938 “disastrous.” Ibid.

³⁵³ Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, p. 12; SGRS-SA, Archive Campagne 1940, GQG box 3, 3rd Section/III/17; Philippe Marnay, [pen name of Jean Vanwelkenhuyzen], “La Politique militaire de la Belgique en 1939-1940,” *Revue générale belge* Mai 1960, pp. 8-9; CDH, p. 81. The exception was a brief period in April, 1940, when the Belgians feared a French attack through Belgium in response to Germany’s attack on Norway. See Eric Simon, “Neutralité Armée: 1936-1940, LA DEFENSE FACE A LA FRANCE,” Centre Liegeois d’histoire et d’archéologie militaires, *Bulletin d’information* VII: 7 (Juillet-Septembre 1999), p. 7.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., VII:2 (Avril-Juin 1998), p. 13; *ibid.*, VII:6 (Avril-Juin 1999), p. 5. Simon also notes that less than half of the units assigned to the Belgo-French border were the weakest second-line reserve units. *Ibid.*, VII:7 (Juillet-Septembre 1999), p. 8.

Thus even the deployment of the Belgian Army exhibited a belief that Belgium would not be drawn into *an all-out struggle* against France.

The years 1937 and 1938 saw increased German rearmament including the fortification of their border with France and, on March 12, 1938, the *Anschluss*, the German annexation of Austria. Meanwhile, the Allies were feverishly building up their arsenals. In Belgium, these years were devoted mainly to building up the army by “the acceleration of programs already in course.” In December 1936, Van Overstraeten had directed the chief of staff that there would be provisions for two possible “alert dispositions”: either a limited alert, “*garde à vous*” (“attention”) in which only active troops would be alerted or a general alert or “*Pied de Paix Renforcé*” (“Reinforced Peace Footing” or PPR) in which active units and the first reserve divisions would go on a war-time footing. Belgian defenses against France in these years have already been discussed but those against Germany relied in the first instance on the covering forces who would occupy the bridges and casemates along the Frontier Canals from Antwerp to Lanaye, the Meuse, the PFL2 and the PFN. In the event of a threat coming from the east (i.e. Germany), five infantry divisions and the Cavalry Corps would hold the Albert Canal, two infantry divisions would defend Liège, one would defend Namur, and the *Chasseurs ardennais* would protect the Meuse between Liège and Namur. Another four infantry divisions would be on the Nèthe and Demer rivers. In 1937, in the face of doubts about effective French aid, a withdrawal position was considered. Should the Belgians be forced from the Albert Canal or the Meuse, they would fall back on a position running from Antwerp to Wavre, with the majority of the army on the section from Antwerp to Louvain, while the motorized forces would hold the southern half from Louvain to

Wavre. This line would become the main line of resistance in 1940 under the name “KW Line” (so named because it extended from Koningshooikt to Wavre). This position would be held by five divisions in the north and another three in the south along the Dyle River; thus, the Allied plan for intervention to this position was called “the Dyle Manouever.” Antwerp itself would be held by four second reserve divisions supported by the PFA, an anti-tank ditch, and the Scheldt River. Nevertheless, the Belgian Army went into 1938 planning for a main line of resistance along the Albert Canal. In any case, the main objective of the Belgian forces was to defend the heart of the country.³⁵⁵

Minister Denis and General Van Overstraeten were preoccupied with anti-aircraft defense. They agreed that this defense should be based on artillery rather than aviation. General Van Overstraeten was opposed to the existence of the Belgian air force. “With a depth of only 300 kilometres, there was insufficient space for manoeuvre and, in any case, they could not compete with a Great Power. No air force was better than an inadequate one.” On the other hand, he advocated a really strong anti-aircraft artillery organization.” As there had been problems with the production of anti-aircraft guns by the Belgian Fonderie royale de Canons, the Belgians ordered materiel from France, Britain’s Vickers, and Sweden’s Bofors.³⁵⁶

In 1937, Minister Denis achieved the formation of the “*Garde aérienne du Territoire*” (“Air guard of the territory” or GAT) which was independent of the army and had a billion franc budget. Its assignment was to defend “vital centers of the country and large agglomerations” but as Belgium is a small country, the assignment essentially

³⁵⁵ Crahay, pp. 155, 184-5; CDHFA, p. 54.

³⁵⁶ ³⁵⁶ Diary entry for 26 décembre 1936 in Van Overstraeten, p. 253; Report of lunch conversation with General Van Overstraeten (and others), Lt. Colonel Blake to Sir Robert Clive, dated 23rd March 1939, p. 2, in MRA-AMB 80/4/XIV, p. 51 [in English].

encompassed the whole country. The GAT was armed with 40mm Bofors guns for planes flying between 1000 and 2000 meters, 75mm Vickers guns for middle altitude planes, and 94mm Vickers for high-flying planes. General Crahay points out that “our DTCA shot down numerous German planes in May 1940, but it could not suffice to protect our sky against the innumerable squadrons that invaded.”³⁵⁷

Ignoring Van Overstraeten, the Belgians also worked on improving their air force, which was a branch of the army rather than an independent organization. The Belgian air force, like the ground force, had drawn down severely after World War I. In 1925, the air force was divided into three regiments—an organization that would last until 1940. In 1933, the “*Brigade Aéronautique*” (“Air Brigade”), was finally commanded by an aviator while the DAT was created in 1935. The *Aéronautique militaire* (Military Aviation or air force) was organized into three air regiments: the first had three observation groups of three squadrons of twelve aircraft each; the second had two groups of three squadrons of monoplane fighters and a group of biplane fighters and the third had one observation group of three squadrons, a squadron of night observation planes, a bombing squadron, and a spare squadron. There was also an aeronautic company, a flying school, an aeronautic school, and a depot.³⁵⁸

A major force for the development of the air force was General Gilliaux, who became the Duke of Alba. With his retirement, the development of the air arm stalled. When General-aviator Hiernaux took over the *Aéronautique militaire* in 1938, the air force was in deep trouble for a number of reasons. One was the outmoded thinking of the commanders. British Air Attaché Wing Commander Davis commented in his 1938 report

Crahay, pp. 218-219.

³⁵⁸ CDHFA, p. 91.

that Minister Denis “does not appear to interest himself much in flying matters and the Aéronautique Militaire undoubtedly suffers as a result. Suggestions for the improvement of this Service put forward, during the year, by the head of the [DAT] have received little support.” Another was simply the rapid advance of airplane technology. Small countries simply could not afford to keep buying new planes as quickly as they developed.

Belgian-designed planes were obsolescent by the time they appeared, although the Renard R-36 and later Renard R-38 fighters showed promise until an R-36 crashed, killing the test-pilot and leading the Belgians to look abroad for their materiel. They did produce one indigenous reconnaissance aircraft, the Renard R-31, but this was very unpopular with its crews. In 1937 the Belgians bought a squadron’s worth of British biplane Gloster Gladiator fighters while the monoplane Messerschmidt BF 109, one of the most recognizable fighters of World War II, had already appeared three years previously. Another two squadrons flew British Fairey Battle light bombers which would get blasted out of the sky in May 1940 for no particular result. Finally, the Belgians tried to obtain British Hawker Hurricane fighters of which fifteen “reconditioned” models, including some ex-RAF models forced down during the “Phoney War” by the Belgian air force, were delivered to Belgium in 1939 while the first license-built model arrived just before the war. The Belgians were beaten to the American market by the British and French and had to content themselves with the Brewster Buffaloes which would make such a miserable impression in the battle of Midway in 1942. Forty were purchased but only arrived after the Belgian capitulation. A major problem in purchasing modern aircraft abroad was that the countries of manufacture were also desperately building up their own air forces and had priority of order. The Belgians ended up having to settle for

Italian CR 42 biplanes that might have been a match for the Gladiators but not for the BF-109s. They would pay the price.³⁵⁹

By the evening of May 9, 1940, the kings, the ministers of national defense, the chiefs of the general staff, the Superior Council of National Defense, and Raoul van Overstraeten had evaluated the military situation of Belgium and its neighbors and, working together or, on occasion, at cross-purposes, created a 650,000 man military with eighteen infantry divisions, twelve of which were of good quality. They had created a motorized Cavalry Corps and an elite *Chasseurs ardennais*, both of which impressed the German planners before, and the German soldiers during, the war. The German military attaché in Brussels, who had observed the 1938 manouvers, gave a glowing review of the Belgian army. He declared to Colonel Goethals, the Belgian military attaché in Berlin that “the merit of the army, its armament, its equipment, as well as the experience of its cadres, make the Belgian army a defensive instrument of the first order. . . . The German army could learn useful lessons in the fashion in which the Belgian battalion organizes itself defensively in reduced time with an extraordinary mastery in the judicious use of the terrain.” The German military attaché went on to praise the Belgian officers. “The general officers [are] extremely young, lively, and remarkably level-headed; company grade officers [are] experienced, very familiar with the capabilities of their unit, handling it with a great good sense and without formalism.” The king himself “represents for the army an incalculable power, susceptible of making veritable miracles and of obtaining

³⁵⁹ CDHFA, pp. 91-94; Crahay, pp. 218-219; *Rapport annuel 1937 [by] Major Paris [and] Wing Commander Davis*, pp. 87-88, in MRA-AMB 80/3/XIII, pp. 122-3 [in English]; *Rapport annuel 1938 [by] Major Paris [and] Wing Commander Davis*, in MRA-AMB 80/3/XIII, pp. 341-342 [in English].

from the army unsuspected efforts which must be taken into account in the evaluation of the capabilities of the Belgian army.”³⁶⁰

³⁶⁰ Colonel Goethals to the Chief of the Military Household of the King, *et al.*, Berlin, September 9, 1938, pp. 1-3, attached to Vicomte Jacques Davignon to Spaak, “Impressions allemandes sur les manoeuvres belges”, Berlin, September 14, 1938, AMBAE 11185/1.

Chapter 6: Belgium 1938-1940

Belgium's international status and defense policy did not significantly change between the passing of the defense bill of 1936 and the outbreak of World War II. Belgians were united in maintaining the country's "independence" both diplomatically and by building a strong enough military to dissuade any potential (German) invader. There was no significant Belgian reaction to the *Anschluss* (the German union with Austria) and the policy of neutrality did not change as a result of the Sudeten Crisis, which tested Belgian diplomacy and resulted in a mobilization oriented as much towards the south as to the east. Nor did it change while Hitler occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia and stole Klaipeda from Lithuania³⁶¹.

The Belgian army began to mobilize at the end of August 1939 when it looked like a country finally dared to stand up to Hitlerian Germany. Once the war broke out, Belgium declared neutrality and rebuffed nearly constant Allied pressure for staff talks or even preemptive entry of British and French troops into Belgium. However, the Belgian military had leaned towards the Allies since the Great War and still showed them favoritism, so an arrangement was made for clandestine staff talks by means of the military attachés. A new main line of defense was built in accordance with when and where the Belgians could expect Allied aid. However, not even the discovery on January 10, 1940 of German invasion plans for Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands could persuade the Belgians to invite the Allies in. It took the German invasion of May 10, for the Belgians to make the call. They then stood shoulder to shoulder with the Allies, fighting in retreat as the First Army Group tried desperately to escape the encirclement threatened by German panzer units flooding through the gap in the French lines around

³⁶¹ To be fair, the Lithuanians had previously stolen Klaipeda, then named Memel, from the Germans and the League of Nations in 1923.

Sedan. When all was lost, the Belgians sacrificed themselves to buy time for the Anglo-French forces to reach Dunkirk and safety.

A. The Belgian Army to May 10, 1940

The Belgian Army spent the period between the passage of the defense bill in December of 1936 and the German invasion instituting the provisions of the bill, hurriedly preparing for a European war that seemed more and more likely. Because of Belgium's status as "a small pacific country" these preparations primarily consisted in equipping the army with defensive weapons at the expense of strike aircraft and armored units. The Belgian army was lavishly equipped with the new 47(mm) antitank gun, at the rate of 60 per infantry division. By comparison, a German infantry division had 36 3.7cm antitank guns although each infantry regiment had another twelve while Belgian regiments only had six. The Belgians also "received a new grenade launcher, the light machine gun was renovated, the rifle modernized, the endowment in 75mm mortars tripled." More artillery was added to each infantry division (4 to 5 groups) and to the army corps (4 to 6 groups) while some corps artillery was motorized. In addition, the D.T.C.A. adopted the very good 40mm Bofors anti-aircraft gun and Belgian units were given "abundant and first-rate" telephone and radio equipment.³⁶²

By August 1938, most of the changes had been instituted and were put on display in Belgium's largest maneuvers since World War I. The American military attaché, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert D. Brown, took particularly favorable note of the Belgian 47mm anti-tank gun and of the morale of the Belgian soldiers despite "much rain and long marches; the final review showed spirit, patriotism. . . ." Lieutenant-Colonel Brown

³⁶²CDHFA, p. 54; "L'effort Militaire Belge depuis 1918", pp. 6-7, in SGRS-S/A Campagne 1940, Généralités G1 A.1.1; Andrew Mollo, *The Armed Forces of World War II* (NY: Crown, 1981), pp. 4-5, 44-45.

concluded that “The Belgian Army is well trained and seriously bent on its purpose. Its General Staff functions well. . . . I am confident that Belgium would be an extremely difficult nation to invade at this time by any force coming from the East.” LTC Brown rated the Belgian Army’s fortress and specialist units, the *Chasseurs ardennais*, and the Cavalry Corps as “excellent,” although the Cavalry Corps was expected to serve as mobile infantry rather than as an armored striking force. The six active infantry divisions and four of the first reserve divisions were “good,” the other two first reserve divisions “fair to good,” and five second reserve divisions “poor to fair.” The Germans essentially echoed those evaluations.³⁶³

There were problems. Belgian Army Captain Guy Dumortier noted that although the reequipment and expansion of the Belgian Army went well initially, “difficulties came to appear progressively and increased at the same time as the international tension. The situation was particularly unfavorable for the materials that national industry could not produce, notably in the domain of aviation and of anti-aircraft defense.” LTC Brown reported the lamentable state of the Belgian air arm and warned of the vulnerability of the Belgian cities and industries. He also found the biggest problem facing the Belgian Army to be a lack of modern equipment, including rifles, machine guns, and especially anti-aircraft guns. A May 1939 newspaper article warned “anti-aircraft artillery must be developed and strengthened so that it can ward off the enemy birds of prey menacing our civil population. This defense is absolutely insufficient at the current time. One can dig

³⁶³ Brown to War Department, September 12, 1938, quoted in Jonathan E. Helmreich, “An American Perception of Belgian Military Preparedness, 1937-1940,” *Belgische tijdschrift voor militaire geschiedenis/Revue belge d’histoire militaire* XXV:5 (Maart/Mars 1984), p. 423; Captain Guy Dumortier, “Doctrine et Plans Defensifs Pour une Politique d’Independence et de Neutralité Armée: Étude de leur Evolution au Sein du Haut Commandement Belge d’Octobre 1936 au 10 Mai 1940” (dissertation, École de Guerre, 1974), p. 43; “Defense de la Belgique”, copy of the “Bulletin de renseignements no. 54 en date du 30 mars 1938, de notre Attaché Militaire à Berlin,” in AMBAE; Helmreich, “An American Perception,” pp. 424-425; Crahay, p. 165.

shelters if one wants, but one cannot counsel the population to shelter themselves in cellars where gasses develop more quickly than upstairs.” The American assistant military attaché for air noted in February 1940 that “The entire picture of Belgian aviation, with a total of perhaps 70 first-line aircraft, is dismal. . . .In case of an offensive involving Belgium the best aid Belgian aviation could give the Allies would be to stay out of the way, making available their landing fields and spotting refueling and repair facilities on as many emergency airdromes as possible.” It was not just a lack of funds that hampered Belgian aviation. The British air attaché, Wing Commander Davies, noted in his 1938 report on the Belgian Air Force that “lack of money is the reason given by the *Aéronautique Militaire* for their present weakness, but the events of the past twelve months tend to show that indecision and lack of co-operation have largely been responsible for this state of affairs.³⁶⁴

Belgian “armored cars” also had their limitations, according to General van Overstraeten: they were “cramped, scarce, and armed with a single machine gun.” In January, 1940 he had the military attaché in London try to get British light tanks equipped with two light machine guns but was turned down because the British needed all they could produce. The Belgian communications system left a lot to be desired and the Belgian logistical system was designed for a long war and Belgian war industry was located in the east of the country.³⁶⁵

³⁶⁴ LTC Brown quoted in Helmreich, “An American Perception,” pp. 425-426; “Preoccupations de l’heure,” May 12, 1939, in AMBAE 11185/1; Capt. John M. Stirling, quoted in Helmreich, “An American Perception,” p. 426; Major Paris and Wing Commander Davies, “Annual Report on the Belgian Army for 1938,” in MRA-AMB 80/3/XIII, # 342 [henceforth “1938 Annual Report”].

³⁶⁵ Diary entry for January 25, 1940, in van Overstraeten, p. 484; Luc De Vos, *La Belgique et la Seconde Guerre mondiale* (Brussels: Racine, 2004), p. 29.

The lack of qualified officers has already been discussed. Although the active officers were well-trained and motivated, “workers, intelligent and apt to learn other methods,” they “manifested, however, too little attention to the social and psychological problems of the soldiers.” Many reserve officers, especially infantrymen, lacked the requisite ability. The officer corps was also very conservative, “which had for a result that many had not internalized the new conceptions of the conduct of war. Despite the unhappy experience of 1914, much too much attention, and above all, financial means went to static concepts, like fortified positions.” In addition, they were “held back by hum-drum methods, pencil-pushers, and deprived of imagination.” Maneuver warfare to block the enemy axes of advance and to deliver a powerful counterattack was not generally appreciated and far too few resources were devoted to it.³⁶⁶

The main hindrance to the improvement of the Belgian military was financial. LTC Brown recognized that the Belgian Army was aware of “the needs of the nation both as to policy, theory of combat, and armament. The sole thing lacking to place these into effect on an efficient and modern footing is lack of money.”³⁶⁷

B. Belgium and the Sudeten Crisis

Germany had spent 1937 ratcheting up its military effort and then aimed it at Czechoslovakia, the only remaining democracy in East Central Europe, and a key French ally. Hitler wanted to shorten his lines in the east, allowing him to send troops elsewhere, and to use the ethnic Germans in the area to raise new divisions. He also viewed the country as *Lebensraum* waiting to happen. He hoped for a localized war and the obvious reluctance of the Allies to do anything gave him reason to hope. Hitler used the Sudeten

³⁶⁶ De Vos, p. 29; Crahay, pp. 246-7; Wanty I:192.

³⁶⁷ LTC Brown quoted in Helmreich, “An American Perception,” p. 425.

Germans as his Trojan Horse. Germany swallowed up Austria (to the delight of many Austrians) on March 12, 1938, and then moved on to demanding rights for the Sudeten Germans. Hitler was also building his western fortifications at an increasing rate.³⁶⁸

Later that month, Belgian Foreign Minister Spaak, responding to a question from a deputy, declared that the French would not be allowed transit through Belgium to come to the aid of Czechoslovakia. In mid-May, rumors of German troops massing on the Czech border led to a Czech mobilization and to Allied warnings to Hitler. The rumors turned out to be false and war was avoided. Meanwhile, Hitler's new military timetable called for an invasion by October 1. On September 5, the Czechs met the demands of the Sudeten German leader Konrad Heinlein and German diplomats were warning Hitler that France and Britain would go to war for the Czechs, "a view that correctly reflects what we now know to have been the French and British attitude at the time." Given the German fortifications, the easiest way for the Allies to reach Germany would have been through Belgium.³⁶⁹

Meanwhile, within Belgium, a debate was triggered by the August maneuvers perceived by many Walloons as anti-French. Paul Struye, contributor to *Libre Belgique*, and shown in hindsight to have been pretty perspicacious, argued that "there is a hierarchy of dangers. 'Our sense of realities,' he writes, 'prevents us from placing on the same level the different perils theoretically conceivable.'" It would have been ridiculous equally to defend all four of Belgium's frontiers because then none of them would be *effectively* defended. He argued for "symbolic" measures to defend all frontiers, but "it is

³⁶⁸ Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Hitler's Foreign Policy 1933-1939: The Road to World War II*, one volume edition (NY: Enigma, 2005), pp. 641-4; "Statut de la Belgique. Aperçu hebdomadaire du 19 au 26 mars 1938," p. 1, in AMBAE 11.451 "Pacte Occidental et statut international de la Belgique".

³⁶⁹ Weinberg, one volume, p. 690-3, 735-40.

necessary nevertheless to bring the bulk of our efforts to that where, for any spirit of good faith, our *immediate* concerns are concentrated, that is to say, our eastern frontier.”³⁷⁰

After a Hitler speech on September 12, the Germans intensified their anti-Czechoslovakian propaganda campaign and finished their military preparations while the Sudeten Germans acted up even more. In Belgium, M. Spaak, speaking for the whole cabinet, declared that Belgian policy regarding the Czechoslovak crisis would be “complete independence” and that Belgium would not get involved in the conflict. This policy was also backed by the Belgian press. Moreover, two Belgian deputies declared that during their recent trip to Germany, M. von Ribbentrop had assured them that Germany would respect Belgian independence and that Germany was happy to hear Belgium would defend its independence.³⁷¹

On September 15, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain held his first meeting with Hitler at the latter’s retreat at Berchtesgaden. Chamberlain talked to Hitler of peace and Hitler talked to Chamberlain of war. Hitler increased the disorder caused by the Sudeten Germans and where that was not sufficient, he sent in Sudeten exiles to cause incidents. Chamberlain returned to Germany on September 22 and reported that the Czechs would accept some territorial revision under certain conditions. Hitler responded that conditions inside Czechoslovakia (caused by his own men) were so bad he had to intervene. He raised new demands “obviously designed to prevent the peaceful agreement toward which Chamberlain was pushing. War seemed inevitable. On September 26, the British publicly warned that the Allies and the Soviet Union (who also had a mutual

³⁷⁰ Paul Struye quoted in Statut de la Belgique. Aperçu hebdomadaire du 6 au 13 août 1938,” pp. 1-2, in AMBAE 11.451 “Pacte Occidental et statut international de la Belgique”.

³⁷¹ Weinberg, one volume, p. 741; Statut de la Belgique. Aperçu hebdomadaire du 10 au 17 septembre 1938,” pp. 1-2, in AMBAE 11.451 “Pacte Occidental et statut international de la Belgique”.

assistance treaty with Czechoslovakia) would all be drawn into a war over Czechoslovakia. The next day, the British formally warned Hitler that the Allies would stand by the Czechs. Hitler was at the time determined to mobilize on the morrow and to invade on September 30. However, on September 28, he was put off by the mobilization of the Royal Navy. The British and French were suggesting compromises, the German generals, Göring, and Goebbels were concerned, and Mussolini was trying to broker a peace and threatened not to back Germany in a war. Hitler backed down.³⁷²

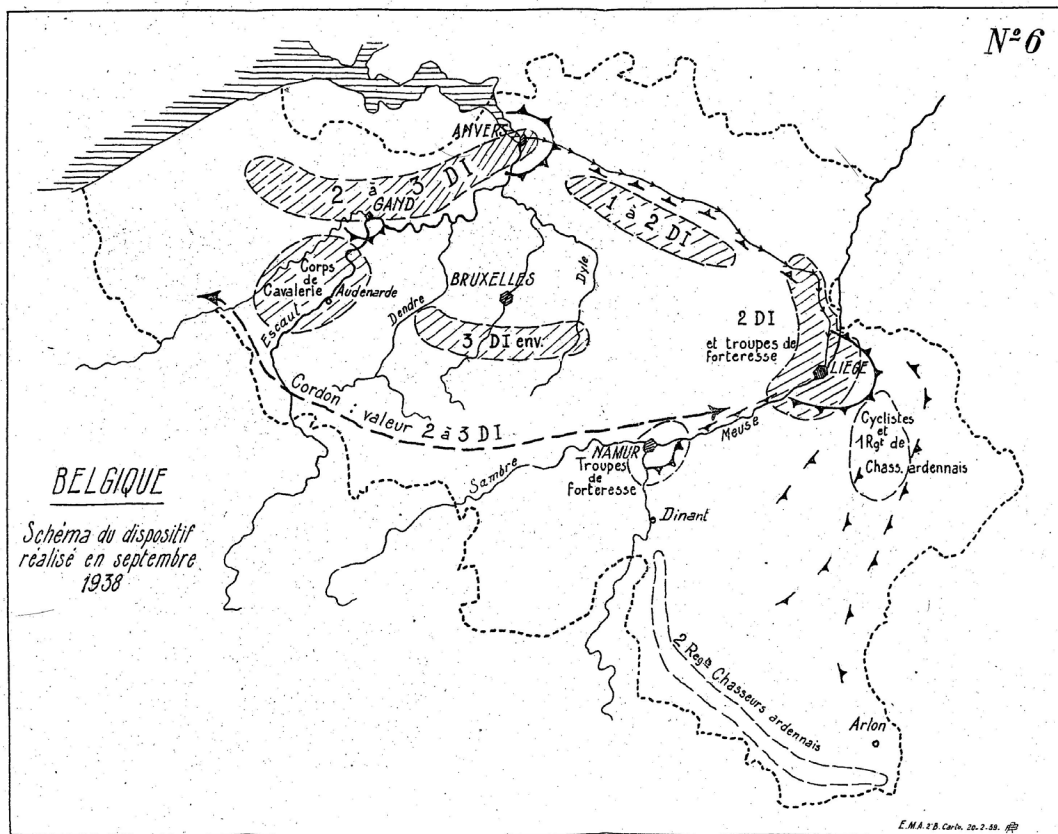
The rest is history: Chamberlain went to Munich and came back with “peace in our time.” He was met with crowds delirious with joy. Historian Brian Bond asserts that “the view that Chamberlain was more concerned to achieve a lasting agreement with Hitler by ‘appeasing’ his supposedly specific and limited claims, rather than to buy time through a more or less cynical deal, is supported by the amazingly little attention given to strategic factors throughout the crisis on the Anglo-French side.” French Prime Minister Daladier, who also took part in the Munich conference, came back expecting to be booed for having sold out the Czechs. He was very surprised to be cheered.³⁷³

On September 20, the Belgian Government, deciding not to call Parliament early, declared that it was

decided to apply with an unshakeable firmness the principles of the policy of independence which it has formulated many times before the Parliament. Its resolution comes notably from the fact that in the course of the current international crisis, it has acquired the certitude that the position taken by it in the matter of foreign policy not only contributes to the maintenance of the general peace but also carries to the maximum the chances that Belgium [will] escape the dangers of war.

³⁷²Weinberg, one volume, pp. 747-67.

³⁷³ Brian Bond, *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), p. 280.



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 From: SGRS-5/A Archive Campagne 1940 Boite P.P.R. 1938, sous-farde Attachés Militaires
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 From: SGRS-5/A Archive Campagne 1940 Boite P.P.R. 1938, sous-farde Attachés Militaires

Map 2: Belgian positions under the PPR 1. SGRS-S/A Archive Campagne 1940 Boite P.P.R. 1938, sous-farde Attachés Militaires.

On September 21, King Leopold warned Prime Minister Spaak and Minister of National Defense Denis that defenses aimed south needed to be increased. On September 23 the Frontier Cyclists and the *Chasseurs ardennais* were alerted to act on their destruction plan while the engineers finished the demolition scheme and prepared bridges and tunnels for destruction. On September 24 the Government met and “decided to reinforce the protection of the territory. To meet this goal, it has proceeded to the recall of soldiers belonging to specialized engineer units charged with effectuating certain technical works.” These works, and the demolitions planned, were for both the eastern and southern frontiers. The Government also called up one regiment of the artillerists of the class of 1937.³⁷⁴

That same day, the French ambassador to Brussels warned Émile Vandervelde that if Germany invaded Czechoslovakia, France would insist Belgium grant its troops passage in accordance with League of Nations Covenant Article XVI. If Belgium refused, France would withdraw its guarantee to protect Belgium. Vandervelde responded “I believe that Belgium would prefer to lose the guarantee.” To a similar point, Paul Hymans answered “I do not understand this alternative; because to accept is on our part to declare war on Germany.” Another Belgian told the French ambassador that if France required passage, “we would fire on the invader.”³⁷⁵

On September 26, in view of Chamberlain’s failure at Bad Godesberg the previous day, and the partial mobilization of the French, the Dutch, and the Hungarians, the Government called up the *Chasseurs ardennais*, cavalrymen, and fortress troops who were on “unlimited leave.” Some provisional battalions, especially those of the Second

³⁷⁴ “Circulaire d’information no. 47” (Brussels, September 20, 1938) in AMBAE 11185/1; defense aimed south was discussed in more detail last chapter. Dumortier, pp. 44.

³⁷⁵ Diary entry for September 24, 1938 in van Overstraeten, p. 298.

and Sixth Infantry Divisions which were south of Brussels facing France, took up their positions.³⁷⁶

On September 27, the Government announced partial mobilization—the so-called “*pied de paix renforcé*.” This brought thirteen Belgian divisions, the Frontier Cyclists, fortress troops, D.T.C.A., and aviation assets to a wartime footing by calling up six or seven classes of reservists. Reserve officers were called up based in part on the needs of their parent unit; each reserve officer carried a letter specifying his date to report. Troops manned the observation (i.e. most forward) positions. The air force was expanded by forming reserve squadrons, turning civilian SABENA airliners into bombers. “In the course of this period, it was Belgium which furnished the greatest military effort.” Yet the Belgian defenses at that time were oriented towards the south to discourage the French from using Belgium as a springboard to invade Germany.³⁷⁷

On September 28, the king issued instructions on manning the “observation positions.” This operation lasted two days and consisted of deploying two divisions in Flanders, one division plus the Cavalry Corps in Hainaut, one in Namur, and two in Liège with another five in the center of the country around Ninove, Hal, and Antwerp.³⁷⁸

On September 30, after the crisis had blown over, requisitions were halted and demobilization was decreed. A leading Belgian newspaper, *Metropole*, reported that

The Government took the measures necessary to avoid any surprise. It concentrated sufficient troops to make an obstacle to any incursion at the points where we could be most threatened and it had, in recalling six classes of reserves, thus 300,000 men, prepared the general mobilization. All this was effectuated in perfect order and those who traveled up and

³⁷⁶ CDHFA, p. 55.

³⁷⁷ Dumortier, p. 45; CDHFA, pp.56

³⁷⁸ CDHFA, pp. 56-7; van Overstraeten quoted in CDHFA, p. 56.

down the front returned filled with wonder, declaring that our army has never been as ready nor as perfectly equipped.³⁷⁹

Belgians, like most Europeans outside of Hitler's inner circle, were thrilled that they had been spared from war. The Belgians credited the wisdom of their government. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that "the unanimity of public opinion with regard to the policy of independence practiced by the Government is apparent in characteristic fashion in the Belgian press [in both languages] in the course of the recent international crisis." A contributor to the *Nation Belge* newspaper wrote on October 2 that:

Another result of the partial mobilization is none other than the confirmation that this episode has proved to all the virtues of the policy called independence. We have never been very warm partisans of this policy that we consider as a stop-gap and a provisional expedient. It is, however, necessary to recognize that, in the framework of current events, proof has been made of the clairvoyance and of the wisdom of those who have, just at the opportune moment, played our international game so well.

...

And it is certain that the neutrality declared by Belgium in an eventual conflict has contributed towards tilting the balance towards the conciliation of the Great Powers, forced each other onto the defensive, and has thus accrued noticeably, to the benefit of Europe, the chances of peace.

On the Flemish side of the aisle, Dr. J. Rombouts wrote in *De Standaard* that "the calm and the confidence with which we wait for what follows is explained and justified by the persuasion that our foreign policy, like our military policy, has and will have for [a] sole base the interests of Belgium."³⁸⁰

³⁷⁹ CDHFA, p. 57; *Metropole*, October 3, 1938, in AMBAE 11185/1.

³⁸⁰ Ministère des Affaires Etrangères et du Commerce Extérieur, "Circulaire d'Information no. 59," Brussels, October 10, 1938, pp. 136-139, in AMBAE 11185/1, "Politique Militaire"; Le Huron, "Pied de paix renforcé et politique d'indépendance," *Nation Belge*, October 2, 1938, in AMBAE 11185/1; Dr. J. Rombouts quoted in "Circulaire d'Information no. 59," p. 137.

It was not only the Belgian papers that praised Belgian policy. The leading French daily *Le Soir* carried an article from its Paris correspondent Roland de Marès that ended, “It is necessary loyally to recognize that the tragic events of these last weeks confirm that [Belgium] was right to withdraw to a policy of independence limited to its means, but reserving entirely its right to free determination in the face of the bankruptcy of the essential guarantees that the treaties of 1919 comprise.” The Germans were also impressed. After the crisis, Belgian Ambassador Davignon reported to Foreign Minister Spaak that “the excellent impression that the attitude of strict political and military neutrality that our country observed in the course of the Czechoslovak crisis has caused is confirmed more and more. The political *milieux* of the Reich have been edified by the sincerity of our policy of independence.”³⁸¹

In other words, the *very same policy* that Belgium was to follow up to May 10, 1940 had been praised to the skies by all segments of political opinion, and foreign opinion, just a year and a half previously as the preserver of peace and Belgian society. In September 1938, the world did not erupt into war because of the actions of actors external to Belgium. One is permitted to ask whether, had Hitler (or a successor) decided to resolve the Danzig crisis peacefully, Belgian actions in 1939-1940 would not have received similar acclaim.

Yet those best qualified to judge the performance of the Belgian Army were considerably less satisfied with its performance than were outside observers. Despite the fact that “this full dress rehearsal of partial mobilization was of the greatest value to the General Staff and to the country as a whole [because] it proved that the spirit of the

³⁸¹ M. Roland de Marès, “Les perspectives nouvelles,” *Soir*, October 3, 1938, quoted in “Circulaire d’Information no. 59,” p. 139; Davignon to Spaak, Berlin, October 10, 1938, p.2, in AMBAE 11185/1, #6899.

population and the troops was excellent [and] both Flemish and Walloons forgot all their differences under the threat of danger and came to the colors rapidly and cheerfully,” the mobilization, and especially the demobilization, of the army revealed several weaknesses in the Belgian military. Major Paris estimated that the greatest problem with the mobilization itself was “the poor supply system. For the first 24 hours, both men and horses had little or nothing to eat. The requisitioning of horses and motor vehicles was carried out unsystematically and the driving of both was on the whole very indifferent.”³⁸²

Perhaps more importantly, the scheme for provisional battalions, fought out so heatedly in 1936, had failed because it did not adequately protect either the Liège-Maastricht front or the Namur-Ostende front. It had not covered the Belgian mobilization. In addition, as General Van den Bergen reported, “[t]he commanders of large units are unanimous in regretting that the constitution of provisional units absorb many active officers, to the detriment of mobilization operations and of the training of formations on the way to mobilization.” Because the troops of the provisional units were already well trained, the chief of staff recommended allowing reserve officers to compete to become platoon leaders in these units.³⁸³

Another flaw in the army was, as we have seen, the lack of reserve officers. Minister Denis warned that there was a lack of 1,000 reserve officers to staff the mobilizable units. He contended that the larger problem was that the Belgian Army had too many units.

³⁸² 1938 Annual Report, #336.

³⁸³ Dumortier, pp. 45-46; Van den Bergen to Minister of National Defense, January 24, 1939, in SGRS-S/A “Documents 1940 Non Ventilés” #5.

I am led to think that we inflate our military machinery—at least that which is usable in the first hours—at the expense of its quality. Wanting to do too much, one risks doing everything badly. Is it necessary to recall, on this subject, the spectacle offered by certain troops [during the *P.P.R.*] incompletely equipped, insufficiently trained, placed in a situation generating disorder and indiscipline and constituted to the detriment of immediately necessary elements?

This was the exact argument raised by General Galet and his disciples before the Mixed Commission of 1936. Mobilization was dependent on the existence of sufficient trained cadres of both active and reserve officers. The Belgian Army simply did not have them for all the desired units and, if things went on as usual, would not have them, according to the General Staff, until 1947!³⁸⁴

Minister Denis rejected business as usual: “I cannot bring myself [to accept] this solution! We must be ready to face danger immediately and *it is from 1939, from now*, that we must take measures moving away from the normal rules of recruitment. I know that. . . we will not have completely and perfectly trained officers.” Speed was the important thing. Among the new measures implemented were the nomination to the grade of second lieutenant of adjutants coming from training schools in Beverloo; the recruitment of officers from Candidate Second Lieutenants of the Reserve on active service; and the designation of career adjutants as platoon leaders, which would produce another 400 platoon commanders. “These measures will tangibly improve the situation. In addition, they will allow the relief of the second lieutenants and lieutenants currently in service: the reports which I have received show that these officers have reached the limit of their abilities.”³⁸⁵

³⁸⁴Denis to Van den Bergen, January 30, 1939, pp.2-3, in SGRS-S/A “Documents 1940 Non Ventilés”, #7.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

We saw in chapter three that there were instances of indiscipline in 1936 among troops required to serve longer than expected. These were repeated during the 1938 mobilization and recounted in many journals. A circular from General Van den Bergen complained that “I have noticed a sloppiness which in certain places has reached lamentable proportions: the recalled [soldiers] go about in slovenly-looking uniforms, abstain from saluting officers, get drunk at all hours in the cafés, give themselves up to uncalled-for demonstrations. . . [sic!].” On September 30, Minister Denis alerted his commanders that “beyond the measures taken by the troop commanders, it is necessary that the territorial commanders take any relevant measures required to avoid the excesses of all types [which] can result from the stay of troops in the cantonments (drunkenness, etc. . .) [sic!].” A M. Van de Bergh, claiming to have been a company commander in 1914, complained to Minister Denis “[y]ou have noted with sadness, as [have] all good Belgians, during the P.P.R. *the indiscipline which reigns in our army*. In my humble opinion, it is necessary to find the cause in the carelessness and the ‘democratization’ which [has reigned] for the last years in our army.”³⁸⁶

The demobilization was also problematical. Major Paris reported that the demobilization orders “gave rise to rather childish exuberance and a display of drunkenness such as has not been seen since the Armistice.” The problem was that the military estimated that it would have required at least three days to demobilize in an orderly manner, returning all equipment to the depots, including “the indispensable verifications before giving receipts to the users; this could not be effectuated in a mad rush where the units jostled each other in order to be finished as soon as possible.” In

³⁸⁶ Minister of National Defense to I-IV Military Areas, September 30, 1938, in MRA 25/29.1, “PPR 1938 Diverses”; Van de Berghe to LtGen. Denis, dated October 10, 1938, in MRA 25/29, *sous-farde* 6; General Van den Bergen quoted in CDHFA, p. 57.

addition, the army had to send requisitioned horses, cars, and bicycles back to their owners, and get the soldiers home.³⁸⁷

Unfortunately, for purely budgetary reasons, the Government opted for “an immediate and hasty demobilization” and sent everybody home at once. “There followed a general exodus, each abandoning immediately everything for which he was responsible, leaving to the active cadre and to the conscripts the care to recover the material, re-assemble it and bring it back to the depot.” This was done imperfectly so that even several days later materiel was just left lying around.³⁸⁸

Despite the problems, King Leopold wrote to Minister Denis that

Putting the Army on the footing of reinforced peace developed with an order, a calm, and a patriotic ardor that public opinion has strongly admired.

In the grave moments that we are passing through, this measure responded to the wishes of the country, because from the viewpoint of the deployment of the forces of the neighboring states, it proved the resolution of Belgium to avoid war on its territory and to make its independence respected.

The preparation by staffs, the zeal of the officers, the good will of the NCOs and soldiers, the patriotic sense of all, have demonstrated, abroad as well as domestically, that the Army was ready and determined to face anything that circumstances might have required.³⁸⁹

In his order calling for this letter to be read to the troops, Minister Denis declared that he was nullifying all punishments incurred in the army during the P.P.R. as of October 5, as well as awarding an extra day of leave to all military “regulated by the chiefs of corps according to the exigencies of service.”³⁹⁰

³⁸⁷ 1938 Annual Report, #336; CDHFA, p. 57.

³⁸⁸ CDHFA, p. 58.

³⁸⁹ Leopold quoted in Minister of National Defense to all Military Authorities, Brussels, October 5, 1938, in MRA 25/29.1 “PPR 1938 Divers”.

³⁹⁰ Cabinet of the Minister of National Defense, no. 52/928/M.5, in MRA 25/29.1 “PPR 1938 Divers”;

Belgian diplomatic historian Jane Kathryn Miller notes that the Belgian government immediately set about repairing all the flaws revealed by the P.P.R., working on improving the supply system, the requisition system, and, especially air defense.³⁹¹ We will see below how the mobilization scheme was completely revamped. The period between the German occupation of the Sudetenland and the German invasion of Poland saw the Belgian Army working “feverishly [to] complete our military preparations in view—still—of escaping a war that was seen approaching with great steps. . . .”³⁹²

C. Belgian Fortifications and Plans

Belgium was also moving ahead with its plans and fortifications. The two were, in fact, tightly linked, as were the coverage plans discussed in chapter three. The fortifications, “the plans and, in a certain measure, the doctrine are inseparable from the French doctrine and plans because the defense of the country is only elaborated in function of the reinforcements which the Powers, guarantors of its independence, can send it.” One problem LTC Brown noted was that the motorized Belgian cavalry was still expected to function as mobile infantry and not as an independent armored striking force.³⁹³

On March 30, 1938, Colonel Goethals, the Belgian military attaché in Berlin reported home that recent statements by General Denis, the minister of national defense, had been widely reported by the German press in articles with titles like “The Belgian Army more capable [sic] of a shock than it has ever been,” “The Albert Canal is the most important and best constructed defense line there is,” “The Belgian Army is ready.”

³⁹¹ See above for details of the inadequacies of Belgian aviation.

³⁹² Miller, p. 265; CDHFA, p. 59.

³⁹³ “L’Effort Militaire Belge depuis 1918”, p. 3; Dumortier, p. 2; Helmreich, “An American Perception,” p. 424.

These articles were persuading German soldiers that “the Belgians, who pass for rebellious customers, and fairly ferocious, are disposed to blow up without hesitation all the country east of the Meuse in case of invasion.” As, indeed, was the case.³⁹⁴

The system of fortifications protecting Belgium in 1940 had been started in 1928 and was “pursued at an unceasingly accelerated rhythm until May 1940. Tightly tied to the plan of campaign, the plan of fortifications and the measures of coverage evolved with it.” Until the death of “the integral defense of the territory,” fortresses were concentrated on Belgium’s eastern frontier, in the provinces of “Liège, Limburg, Namur, and Luxembourg.”³⁹⁵

The six old fortresses around Liège that had held the Germans up in 1914 were modernized beginning in 1928, while starting in 1934 pillboxes with machine guns were erected to protect the flanks of the fortresses. “A [permanently occupied] belt of shelters against surprise invasion” armed with 47mm anti-tank guns, machine guns, and searchlights and protected as well with anti-tank obstacles, was created to block all avenues to Liège from the east. These shelters were larger than 8.5m by 6.25m and were designed to resist a 150mm shell. Strategic locations nearer the frontier became “fortified centers” with garrisons. In addition to the old fortresses and shelters, work began on a new belt of modern fortresses—“Eben-Emael, Neufchâteau, Battice, Pepinster, and a multitude of flanking shelters” like the ones for the old fortresses. In fact, there were four lines of the PFL (“Position fortifié de Liège” or “Fortified Position of Liège”). PFL I, “a vast circular arc going from Visé to Comblain-au-Pont,” included the new forts of Aubin-Neufchâteau, Battice, and Pepinster-Tancremont as well as 179 cement pillboxes, 8.5m

³⁹⁴ “Defense de la Belgique”, copy of the “Bulletin de renseignements no. 54 en date du 30 mars 1938, de notre Attaché Militaire à Berlin,” in AMBAE.

³⁹⁵ “The Belgian Military Effort,” p. 3.

by 6.25m, usually containing two machine guns. PFL II included three of the 1914 forts and 61 shelters. PFL III was constituted by bridgeheads at “Visé, Argenteau, and Jupille” with another 42 shelters. PFL IV, or the “Meuse line of defense” constituted 31 pillboxes on the left bank of the Meuse, nine on the Albert Canal, two 1914 forts, and “ten large shelters.” In addition, as we saw above, many works of demolition were prepared and guarded by the Frontier Cyclists.³⁹⁶ The “great forts [around Liège] possessed a good close-in defense, except. . . against the aerial menace.” This was quickly learned by the garrison of fort Eben-Emael on May 10. The “neutralist” bent of the Belgian politicians, which has already been seen in the lack of armored vehicles, also affected the Belgian fortifications. The guns of the forts around Liège, “the only real justification for the hundreds of millions—at the time—that had been consecrated to their construction” lacked both quantity and quality. The guns were too small and the heaviest, the 120mm guns were deliberately limited in range so they could not reach targets beyond the German border! “A pusillanimous conception of the policy of neutrality obliged it.”³⁹⁷

In Limburg and Antwerp the defenses were based on the waterlines, especially the Maastricht-Bois-le-Duc and Meuse-Scheldt junction canals. These waterlines were defended by flanking shelters like those in Liège and bridges were blocked by obstacles. Controlled flooding—like that which saved the Belgian Army in 1914—and demolitions were planned and prepared. Also in this region was the Albert Canal which, for most of the 1936-1940 period, represented the Belgian Main Line of Resistance. It ran from the Fortified Position of Antwerp (which no longer had artillery) south-east to the Fortified Position of Liège, and then south-west to the Fortified Position of Namur. The stretch of

³⁹⁶ “L’Effort Militaire Belge,” pp. 3-4; CDHFA, p. 72; Crahay, p. 211.

³⁹⁷ Wanty, I: 187-188.

the canal from Antwerp to Liège had the south bank built up to control the opposite bank, 148 machine-gun-armed shelters, or one every 500-600 meters, and bridgeheads on the north bank to protect the vital locks. The Meuse from Liège to Namur had 70 shelters. The defense of Limburg was based on fort Eben-Emael.³⁹⁸

In Namur and Luxembourg, the central defensive point was the Fortified Position of Namur (PFN), which had been renovated and improved like that of Liège. The PFN consisted of seven fortresses dating back to 1914 (two had been destroyed beyond repair) and 156 flanking shelters. The fortresses contained forty artillery pieces “under cupolas, of which two [were] 105mm cannons, 12 75mm, and 26 75mm howitzers” as well as small arms. In addition, the *Chasseurs ardennais* were entrusted with the defense of the region. They were “specially trained for a war of skirmishes. This tactic, favored by cuts in the terrain and by demolitions, was capable of inflicting losses and important delays on an invader.” Shelters in the Ardennes were 3.25m by 3.5m with walls only .4m-.6m wide, designed to stop a 77mm round and to hold a machine gun and four men.³⁹⁹

After 1936, neutrality required, as we have seen, an emphasis on fortifications facing south, including the “national redoubt” based on the new Ghent Bridgehead and the Antwerp fortifications, as well as an increase in the covering forces, which now had to defend in two directions. Another major consequence was the abandonment of the Albert Canal as the main defensive line. It became instead a covering position. As Colonel B.E.M. Diepenrykx pointed out in his “L’Effort Militaire Belge Depuis 1918,” written in 1941, “Left to itself, the Belgian army could not hold a front of over 200km.” The Albert Canal line also lacked depth, it was too far from France for Allied aid to

³⁹⁸“L’Effort Militaire Belge,” p. 4; CDHFA, pp. 72-5; Crahay, p. 208

³⁹⁹“L’Effort Militaire Belge,” p. 4; Crahay, p. 211.

arrive before the Germans did, and because the line was elliptical, it was very exposed to flank attacks.⁴⁰⁰

In fact, it was an intervention from the king himself that led to the decision of the General Staff in September, 1939 “which was of crucial significance to Belgium and her allies, to construct the ‘K-W Line.’” The decision was based on “Leopold’s appreciation of the speed of modern warfare.” The new defensive line, known as the K-W Line because it ran, starting at Antwerp, from **K**oningshoyck south through “Hansbrug. . . then followed the west bank of the canal from Malines to Louvain, surrounded this last city, then passed along the Dyle⁴⁰¹ up to the environs of **W**avre, and then to Rixensart.”⁴⁰²

General van Overstraeten argued that in the event of a German-Italian war against the Allies, with Britain unable to intervene on Belgium’s behalf (presumably being busy with the Italians in the Mediterranean), the Antwerp-Wavre-Hal-Ninove position “would then offer to the Belgian Army a breakwater, a defensive-offensive refuge from which it could impose on the invader and operate following the example of the role played in 1914 thanks to the entrenched camp of Antwerp.” From Antwerp to Wavre, there were 235 machine gun shelters in three lines, “permitting, in what concerns the two first echelons at least, the realization of a deep, dense, and continuous sheet of flame.” There was also “a continuous network of accessory defense, before each echelon, flanked by the first of MGs under shelter,” a buried telephone network, concrete command posts, and an

⁴⁰⁰ “L’Effort Militaire Belge,” p. 5; Keyes, p. 103.

⁴⁰¹ Hence the Allied name for their intervention along this line, “The Dyle Plan.”

⁴⁰² Keyes, p. 103; Wanty I:188.

anti-tank obstacle. All told, the Belgians had created, in an extremely cold and difficult winter, 302 camouflaged machine-gun shelters.⁴⁰³

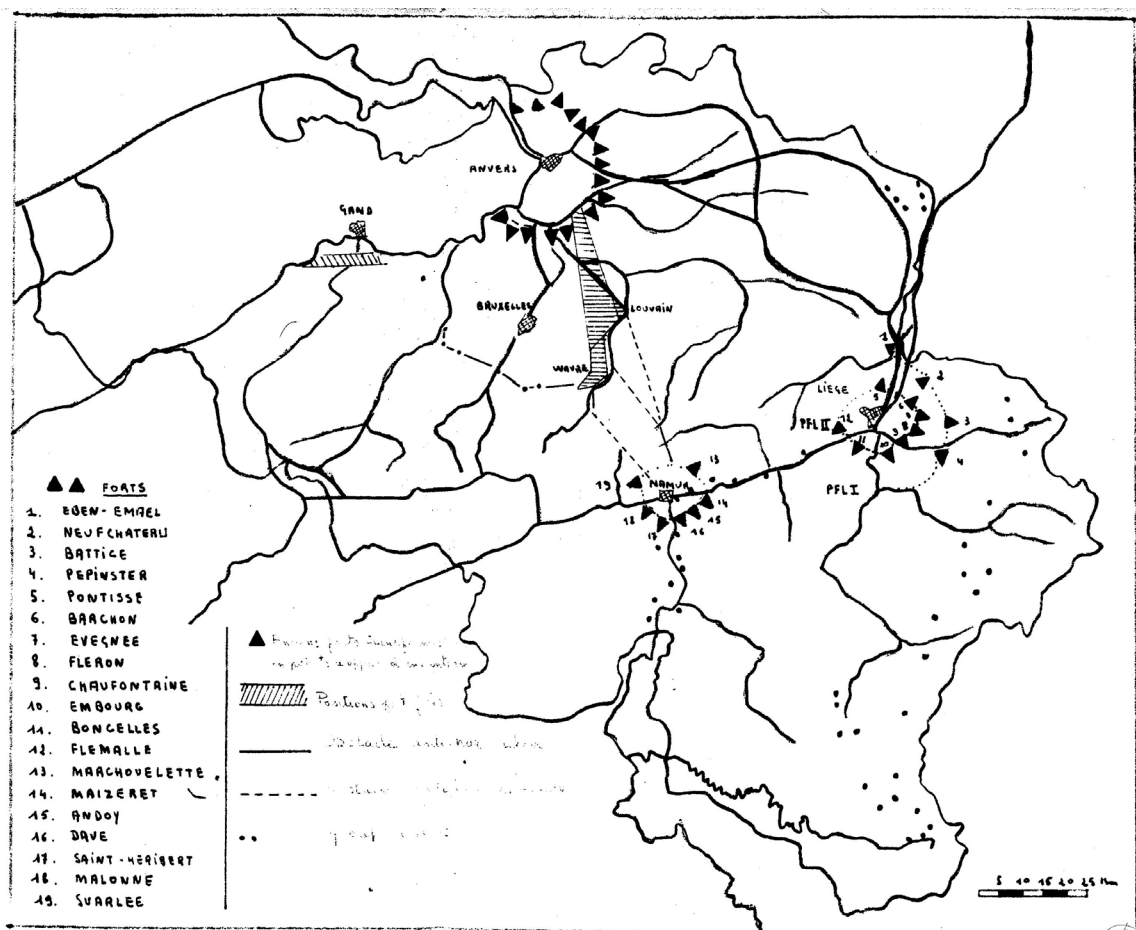
A Belgian Commandant (O-5?) who worked on the line summed things up thus: “it is undeniable that those who have proceeded with the building of the K-W barrier can carry a real sentiment of satisfaction, mixed, however, with immense regrets.”

Satisfaction because the works were completed in the time allotted; regrets because “[d]uring the ten months which preceded the war, the contrast between the orders emanating from superior authority prescribing acting as quickly as possible, and the counter-orders of these same authorities slowing the execution, had always diverted the executants.” It had taken a year of study before the line was even decided upon and then another three months before anything was done and then another three months was wasted because “one worked without firm facts and. . . each result of reconnaissance, approved at first, was then put in check.” Then, between January and April 1940, the obstacles south of Wavre had to be moved, and then moved again. “The officers of the [General Staff] which carried out the reconnaissance no longer showed any enthusiasm, because each of them were aware that all the same it would be started again.”

In conclusion, the 4.D.Gn.F.⁴⁰⁴ would have easily finished, for May 10, a magnificent position which, in place of stopping at Wavre, would have united with the [Namur bridgehead] north of Namur. It could have, for the same date, finished the Geenebosch-Tirlemont position, link between the Albert Canal and K-W *Certainly, given the events which occurred south of Namur [i.e. the German breakthrough and crossing of the Meuse in the French sector], a K-W position impeccably finished would have without doubt only delayed the enemy advance. But then—and only then—we would not have incurred any responsibility in the defeat [my emphasis].*

⁴⁰³ van Overstraeten, diary entry for September 21, 1938, p. 296; CDHFA, p. 76; Commandant B.E.M. Bernard, “Historique de la position K-W ed de la 4.D.Gn.F.”, pp. 1, 5.

⁴⁰⁴ The 4th Division of Fortress Engineers, the unit responsible for creating the K-W Line under the I Army Corps.



Map 4: Belgian Fortifications in 1940. Dumortier, Guy. "Doctrines et Plans Defensifs Pour une Politique d'indépendance et de Neutralité Armée" (Thesis, Ecole de Guerre, 1974), Appendix 5.

However, even as built, it was a strong position and ready for the Belgian and British forces and “if it had been attacked, one could have hoped that it would have resisted well.” In the end, as we will see, the K-W Line had to be evacuated in order to try to get the Allied forces out of the closing German trap.⁴⁰⁵

South of the K-W Line, there was a 28km gap, the so-called “Gembloux Gap” in the planned French sector, between the K-W Line and the PFN. To fill this, the anti-tank gap was provided by the path of a railway and obstacles were provided by “Cointet elements.” “A Cointet element is a steel grill with supports [with a] height of 3 meters, width of 5 meters, weighing 1,300 kg and provided with rollers to permit its displacement. A Cointet barricade is constituted by a range of elements linked together by assembly pins and three metallic cables. In theory, a tank which charges into this obstacle would be trapped by the elements which would pivot around it.” The first Cointet elements were emplaced on September 1, 1939 by military laborers while civilian workers installed cement tetrahedrons and rails.⁴⁰⁶

The work on the Gembloux gap was completed in March of 1940, at which time General van Overstraeten decided the line left Namur too far forward and had the line moved eight kilometers further east, to a more favorable position. Fifteen more kilometers of Cointet elements had to be taken from the Ghent Bridgehead and from in front of Wavre. General Crahay points out that “[t]he French had been warned of this change of position; despite that, they occupied the line of the railway and the advanced

⁴⁰⁵ Bernard, pp. 15-17, in SGRS-S/A Campagne 1940 Généralités G 1, Carton A/*farde 2/sous-farde a*, doc. No. 3; Crahay, p. 210.

⁴⁰⁶ Crahay, p. 210; de Fabribeckers, p. 58.

line was scarcely utilized.” In May, 1940, in three days of fighting, the French armored forces successfully held up German tank formations in front of the Gembloux Gap.⁴⁰⁷

There was also a forward line based on waterlines in the north and east of the country and on shelters in Luxembourg and in the Ardennes. Of Belgium’s organized lines, 120km was not occupied, *780km were occupied and of those, only 80 were lost to enemy attack!* Commandant Bernard’s praise of the builders of the K-W Line probably goes as well for the builders of Belgium’s other fortifications:

To be aware of the amount of devotion of this personnel, so conscious of the urgency of their task, it is necessary to have seen the soldiers assemble and place the obstacles, in the mud of November, in the snow of January, in the ice of February, with a merit even greater because they were perfectly aware of the multiple changes that were made to the traces. It is necessary to have seen the officers and civilian supervisors direct the works of concrete pouring through all the bad weather—notably in February when it was decided, as a lesson from the Finnish war, to pour concrete during the frost, standing at the height of the camp at 14 or 15 degrees [Celsius] below zero at night—they supervised the work, admirably conscious of the importance of their mission.⁴⁰⁸

Fortifications were not the only thing on the minds of the Belgian planners. In light of certain deficiencies of the provisional battalions revealed by the mobilization during the Sudeten Crisis, the Belgian Army also revamped its mobilization scheme. It was completely reshaped into a five-stage process “in view of obtaining prompt warning, with sufficient forces to face simultaneously east and south; the goal being less to prepare for a long war than to discourage a surprise attack against the territory.” The units would be deployed closer to their covering positions. The new five phases were:

-Phase A: putting on a war footing of the six active divisions, one division of *Chasseurs ardennais*, Frontier Cyclists, and fortress units.

⁴⁰⁷ Bernard, p. 4; Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), p. 38.

⁴⁰⁸ CDHFA, p. 72; Crahay, p. 212; Bernard, pp. 15-16.

- Phase B: recall of two 1st reserve divisions and of three regiments of *Chasseurs ardennais*.
- Phase C: recall of the other four 1st reserve divisions.
- Phase D: partial recall of the 2nd reserve divisions.
- Phase E: beginning of hostilities and execution of general mobilization.

This mobilization scheme would be implemented in the late summer of 1939. The Belgian plan of defense against a German attack⁴⁰⁹

had been elaborated by the E.M.G. on the basis of the following factors of which the principles were:

the experience acquired during the invasion of 1914; the information on the methods of total war received during the campaign in Poland;

the potential of the enemy, whose shock units could, thanks to the coordinated and massive utilization of ultra-modern armaments, carry out devastating penetrations

and, finally, the estimation of the time that would pass before the arrival and active collaboration of Franco-British troops.

The plan dating from January 1940 involved placing its twenty-two divisions on an initial 210km front along the Albert Canal. No help was anticipated from the Dutch while the Allies were only going to reach the “Louvain-Namur-Meuse” position. The Belgians would have to hold their current positions long enough for Allied aid to get established on the K-W Line but could not expect to stop a much superior German force there. “It is therefore necessary to prepare the retreat of the army.” The Army would fall back to the K-W Line, there joining the Allied forces, “where it will be able to realize an occupation density sufficient to accept the stopping battle.” Plans were made for the III Army Corps, which would be exposed in Liège, to retreat to the Méhaigne river north of Huy while I Army Corps would fall back from the Albert Canal to the K-W Line. Group K in the

⁴⁰⁹ Dumortier, p. 46.

Ardennes would defend “the Meuse between Huy and Liège, in view of permitting the eventual retreat of the III CA towards the West.”⁴¹⁰

D. The “*Drôle de Paix*”

As the Belgians were firming up their defensive plans, the European situation was degenerating into an open war. The German appetite had not been slaked by the occupation of the Rhineland. In March 1939, Hitler connived at the secession of Slovakia from the rump Czechoslovakia (the Slovaks were told they would be returned to the Hungarians if they did not declare independence) and then, on the fifteenth of that month, German troops occupied the remains of Bohemia and Moravia, which became a German “protectorate.” This first occupation of non-German lands persuaded even Neville Chamberlain that Hitler could not be trusted.

Meanwhile, Belgium was reeling from one coalition government to another. A Government led by Paul-Henri Spaak collapsed in February 1939 over a scandal in which a Flemish doctor, who had taught at the German-sponsored Flemish university in Ghent during the Great War and been sentenced to death by the Belgians after the war for that before being amnestied, was appointed to a new Royal Flemish Academy of Medicine. There followed a conflict between Flemish nationalists and pro-Flemish veterans who supported Dr. Martens and the “patriotic” veterans who opposed a collaborator getting such a high position. The monarchy was embarrassed because the names of the Academicians were released before the King had signed the order.⁴¹¹

⁴¹⁰ “*Memorandum* annexé a la note verbale du Sept. 1941”, p. 1, in AMBAE 11984, *sous-farde* “relations hollands-belges 1939-1941; Crahay, p. 198; Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Belgian Campaign*, pp. 32-3; General Van den Bergen to the King, January 23, 1940, quoted in Crahay, p. 198.

⁴¹¹ Witte, et al., p. 139; Dumoulin, pp. 128-133.

Spaak's government was followed by a Catholic-Socialist government formed by Hubert Pierlot. It lasted six days. New elections were held on April 2, the same day Dr. Martens withdrew from the Academy. The elections favored the Catholics and Liberals at the expense of the Socialists. Pierlot formed a new government that lasted until the war.⁴¹²

On March 23, Germany forced Lithuania to relinquish its seaport of Klaipeda. On May 22, the Pact of Steel between the Germans and the Italians, who had just seized Albania, was signed and on August 25, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed, shocking the world and essentially giving Hitler a free hand in Poland. Hitler wanted that free hand because he was engineering a crisis over the "Polish Corridor" separating most of Germany from East Prussia and over Danzig (now Gdansk), a German city, created a "free city" under the aegis of the League of Nations. The Poles, unlike the Czechs, were not disposed to give in to German pressure and the Allies were not disposed to pressure the Poles to do so. War seemed increasingly likely. The French army was alerted on August 20, when it recalled reservists belonging to the covering units and deployed forces to their security positions. The Poles filled out their alert units on August 23 and they left for their positions on August 26. They only declared full mobilization on August 30 and it came into effect on the following day. The mobilization was against the wishes of the French and British ambassadors in Warsaw. On September 1, the day of the German invasion of Poland, the French closed their frontier with Germany, sending the population of that region to the south of the country. General mobilization was declared on September 2. The general offensive, which the French promised the Poles would force Germany to send units to the west, opened with skirmishers entering the Saar region on

⁴¹² Dumoulin, p. 133.

September 8, with main forces following the next day and putting the Germans to fright. However, the offensive involved only a dozen of the 35 active and 37 reserve divisions facing Germany and lacked air support. It stopped before it reached the German fortifications. The French action was described to the Polish military attaché as including half of the active forces on the north-eastern front and massive air support. On September 12, with the Poles in free-fall, Generalissimo Gamelin halted the offensive and the troops returned to French soil.⁴¹³

On August 25, the Belgian Government declared Phase A of mobilization, putting on a war footing active units and headquarters including the General Staff of the Army, three corps headquarters (I, II, and III), the HQ of the Cavalry Corps, the HQ of the T.D.L.N.⁴¹⁴, the HQs of the DAT and DTCA, and their subordinate units, as well as the first division of *Chasseurs ardennais*, the Frontier Cyclists, Fortress Regiments of Namur and Liège, the three regiments of Belgian aviation, and the first two regiments of army artillery.⁴¹⁵

On August 28, Phase B was declared with two first reserve divisions (8 and 11), a battalion of special fortress troops, and the second division of *Chasseurs ardennais* being raised. On September 1, the same day the *Wehrmacht* rolled into Poland, Phase C was declared. Belgium officially declared its neutrality on September 3, the same day the Allies declared war on Germany. A government of national union was formed by the addition of the Socialists to the Catholic-Liberal coalition. This government was given special powers to rule by decree. King Leopold left for Breendonck (Belgian HQ) to assume his constitutionally mandated position of commander in chief. Belgian forces

⁴¹³ de Fabribeckers, p. 47-49.

⁴¹⁴ *Troupes de Défense du Luxembourg et de Namur*.

⁴¹⁵ CDHFA, p. 79.

were still mainly facing south, because the Germans were busy in Poland while the Allies might violate Belgian neutrality to come to Poland's rescue. This was not the result of a change in the estimation of the relative threat posed by the Germans and the Allies but rather a realization that Germany simply did not have enough forces in the west to launch an offensive while the French did. Three army corps and the TDLN confronted the French while two army corps faced north and east. In the Ardennes, the Cavalry Corps and the *Chasseurs ardennais* had some units facing east and others facing south.⁴¹⁶

Starting on September 28, following the news of the surrender of Warsaw to the Germans, Belgian dispositions were shifted at last so most units were facing the Germans in the east. The next day, the order was given to occupy the PFA and the Albert Canal with three corps of seven divisions plus a regiment (V plus the 17th line infantry regiment, IV, II going from west to east) and another two divisions were sent from Beverloo to Ghent and the North Sea coast while the Cavalry Corps was augmented. At the beginning of November, I Army Corps took up positions on the Albert Canal between the Cavalry Corps and III Army Corps with the 4th and 6th divisions. The old I Corps positions facing south were manned by the reinforced 10th division, the 18th division went to Louvain, and the 13th division joined the Cavalry Corps. These dispositions were essentially those that would come into play on May 10th, albeit with some changing of units. There were some minor troop movements involved with the alert of November 11.⁴¹⁷

Belgium's biggest intelligence coup literally fell from the air. On January 9, German paratroop major Hellmuth Reinberger had attended a briefing on the coming

⁴¹⁶ CDHFA, pp. 79-80.

⁴¹⁷ CDHFA, pp. 81-82; Luc De Vos, *La Belgique et la Seconde Guerre Mondiale* (Brussels: Racine, 2004), p. 16.

invasion of the west and was given files (*not* to be taken by air) to deliver to the commander of the First Air Corps in Cologne—files containing the plans for the paratroops in the invasion of the west. However, Reinberger’s friend, *Luftwaffe* major Erich Hoenmanns, a pilot, offered him a lift in his plane, which was accepted. The plane developed mechanical problems and Major Hoenmanns looked for a place to put down. Seeing a river, and believing it to be the Rhine, he landed. The sight of “bowl-shaped helmets over blue uniforms instead of bell-shaped helmets over field-gray uniforms” disabused him of that notion. The river was, in fact, the Meuse and Hoenmanns had landed by Mechelen in Belgium. Hence the name of this event, “The Mechelen Incident.” Major Reinberger tried to destroy the documents behind a nearby haystack but was prevented by the arrival of Belgian troops. He got another opportunity in the stove-heated interrogation room and partially succeeded when the Belgian officer in charge, a Captain Rodrigues turned the other way. After investigating, the Belgians concluded that the plans were genuine. The plans indicated an invasion of Holland and an attack on the Maginot Line, both of which were to be diversions for the main thrust across Belgium, south of Liège and Namur, turning north-west, and smashing through the Gembloux Gap. A paratroop division was to seize the bridges over the Meuse River between Namur and Dinant for the armored forces. This information was shared with the Allies.⁴¹⁸

In the aftermath of the “Mechelen Incident,” two battalions in the Ardennes were sent to the intended German landing zones while another one watching bridges over the Meuse was reoriented facing east on January 12. The next day the 4th Infantry Division was sent from Beverloo while the *Chasseurs ardennais* battalions at Libramont and

⁴¹⁸ Jean Vanwelkenhuyzen, Jean. *Neutralité Armée: La Politique militaire de la Belgique pendant la “Drôle de Guerre,”* Coll. “Notre Passé” (Brussels: La Renaissance Du Livre, 1979), pp. 79-81; Ernest R May, *Strange Victory: Hitler’s Conquest of France* (NY: Hill and Wang, 2000), pp. 314-318.

Neufchâteau were sent to the Ourthe River. The evening of January 13, the message went out to the units, “attack virtually certain tomorrow at dawn.” Belgian troops on the French frontier were given orders to remove the obstructions blocking the entry of Allied troops and not to oppose the entry of Allied troops. The troops were in position on January 14 with the last three infantry divisions arriving in position. However, nothing happened and on January 15, the alert was called off and the barriers were raised against the Allies again. Hitler had indeed planned to attack but was put off by the foul weather.⁴¹⁹

Phase D of mobilization came on January 14. In phases C and D, new units were created but these creations took place over time. It took over two months to form the last nine infantry divisions while the T-13 companies of the active and first reserve divisions had still not received all their equipment by May 10.⁴²⁰

In the aftermath of the Mechelen Incident, Belgian chief of staff General Van den Bergen was replaced for his part in ordering the removal of the barriers to the Allies. In fact, according to historian/general Albert Crahay, the blame should have gone to General van Overstraeten for having had the message sent, but the orders went out from the General Staff under Van den Bergen’s name and “since the King’s counselor could not be implicated, the chief of the E.M.G.A. had to resign.” Historian Jean Vanwelkenhuyzen for his part argues that van Overstraeten had opposed the ideas contained in Van den Bergen’s orders, as did the government, which went out on Van den Bergen’s own responsibility. Historian Ernest May asserts that Van den Bergen misunderstood van Overstraeten who amended Van den Bergen’s message to the units from “imminent

⁴¹⁹ Vanwelkenhuyzen, *Neutralité Armée*, p. 82; CDHFA, p. 83; May, pp. 318-19.

⁴²⁰ CDHFA, p. 79.

attack probable” to “imminent attack virtually certain.” Because van Overstraeten rarely shared his motives, Van den Bergen, “not understanding that Van Overstraeten intended to startle the heretofore phlegmatic Dutch into action, not to state his own assessment of risk, took the words literally and ordered measures appropriate for a war that was ‘virtually certain.’” Those measures included letting the Allies in.⁴²¹

Prime Minister Pierlot saw in Van den Bergen’s orders an encroachment on ministerial responsibilities. General Denis opened an investigation which, on January 27 found that Van den Bergen’s orders had led to a situation where “for nearly forty-eight hours, the entry of Belgium into the hostilities no longer depended on our will, but on that of our neighbors. If these had penetrated [Belgium] without waiting longer, we would have been drawn, despite ourselves, into the conflict and the government, in ignorance of everything, would have found itself in a singular posture.” On January 31, General Van den Bergen resigned as chief of staff and on February 5, he took command of V Army Corps in Antwerp. British Military Attaché LTC Blake reported that:

The reason [for Van den Bergen’s resignation] which is the more generally accepted one is that there has been, for some time, a state of friction between General Van den Bergen and Major-General Van Overstraeten. . . . It is a known fact that General Van Overstraeten enjoys a very special position at the Palace. It has been stated that his interference in matters concerning the higher command has exceeded the normal influence of a Commandant of the Staff College and Military Advisor to the Sovereign. It is possible that General Van den Bergen has been irritated to such an extent by this interference that he decided that either he or General Van Overstraeten had to go, and that the King ruled in favor of retaining the services of the latter. . . . The opinion that General Van den Bergen’s resignation came about as the result of friction between himself and General Van Overstraeten is held, so they inform me, by the French and United States Military Attachés.⁴²²

⁴²¹ Crahay, p. 199; May, p. 319.

⁴²² Vanwelkenhuyzen, *Neutralité Armée*, pp. 93-94; Report quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 94; F.A.A. Blake to Sir Lancelot Oliphant, Brussels, February 10, 1940, pp. 1-2, in MRA-AMB 80/4, #84-85.

The choice of his successor fell first on van Overstraeten, the logical choice, but he demurred and instead Major-General Oscar Michiels was chosen. “The designation of this professional could raise no critique and General van Overstraeten [was] sure to find in him an executant at the height of his task. . . .” The Mechelen Incident also caused friction between the Belgians and the Allies.⁴²³

The Belgians had one more major alert before the night of May 9, 1940. This one was related to the German invasions of Norway and Denmark. As we shall see later, the Belgians rejected, once again, Allied pleas to be allowed to enter Belgium preventively. The Belgians feared the Allies would use the German distraction to attack through Belgium and take the Germans by surprise. On the same night as the invasions, April 9, 1940, the Belgian forces reoriented themselves facing south again, with the 8th ID manning the southern part of the PFN, Group K guarding against the south, the 7th ID leaving the North Sea coast and heading to the Ninove-Hal-Mont-Saint-Jean position and there recovering its 18th Line Infantry Regiment, and the VI Army Corps at Ghent preparing to man the Ghent Bridgehead. The next day, the Belgian defenses facing south were even more reinforced. On the 11th, reports reached Belgium that “the German Army is very active before the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.” On the 12th, Colonel Goethals reported that the German Norwegian invasion did not rule out a general attack in the West. At the same time, the Belgian military attaché in Paris reported the French had promised not to enter Belgium without being invited. Defenses began being shifted back to the east although on the 13th more reinforcements were sent south. On the 14th, with no

⁴²³Vanwelkenhuyzen, *Neutralité Armée*, p.94.

more German threats and with the French assurance intervening, the Belgians called off the alert and faced east once again, where they would stay until the German invasion.⁴²⁴

The Belgian commanders were acutely aware of the morale and behavior of their troops. On August 29, 1939, the new British military attaché, LTC Blake, reported that “the Belgian mobilization has proceeded very smoothly, and there have been none of the scenes of excitement which, I am told, took place in September last year.” General Van den Bergen attributed this to two causes: In 1939, as opposed to 1938, the Belgian Army brought its active army to war strength before forming the reserve units. “Consequently, the work of seeing this through was done quickly and efficiently without the interruption of the very large number of reserve officers and men joining up simultaneously as had been the case 12 months ago.” Also, “[m]uch of the disorder caused last year was through cases of drunkenness. This year, the most stringent regulations were enforced and all licensed houses throughout the country were ordered to open only between the hours of 11:30am to 2pm and from 5pm to 9pm.”⁴²⁵ The next day, an instruction from General Van den Bergen to the commanders of army corps, the Cavalry Corps, the TDLN, Army Engineers, DAT, and the anti-aircraft brigade read:

I have the honor of drawing the attention of all the military authorities and especially that of the chiefs of corps to the pressing necessity that there is in the current situation to do everything possible to maintain and exalt the morale of the soldier.

In pursuit of this goal, as soon as the good progress of the operations of the reinforcement of the Army will permit it, everything will be started in the units to furnish to the soldier the maximum of distractions compatible with the necessities of service and the resources of which the corps disposes.

It is absolutely necessary to avoid idleness and inaction. . . .

⁴²⁴ CDHFA, pp. 83-5.

⁴²⁵ F.A.A. Blake, “Reports on Belgian Military situation,” August 29, 1939, in MRA-AMB 80/4 #177-8.

Everything which touches on the well-being of the soldier must be made the object of all cares, particularly the daily diet and the installation of canteens.

The commanders of companies (battery, squadron) will give more morale talks.⁴²⁶

In the beginning of September, after the declaration of neutrality, King Leopold took to the radio to urge his citizens to remain neutral in word and deed: “in these grave moments, where one word, one act, one unconsidered writing can harm the interests of the country, I request of each to impose on himself, in the expression of his sentiments, the rigorous discipline which a strict neutrality demands.” On September 30, Minister Denis ordered that every Belgian soldier, of whatever rank, had to keep his comportment compatible with the policy of “independence,” “to prohibit anything that could prejudice, irritate, or divide in order to retain only that which could be of a nature to further the superior interests of the nation, in the union of all her sons.” On November 10, royal orders were promulgated prohibiting, without approval of the military authority, meetings in areas of cantonments to which active-duty soldiers would be admitted. Also prohibited was the sending or distribution to active-duty military of “tracts, tickets, circulars, or other writings, printed or not, of the same nature.”⁴²⁷

These measures were imperfectly successful, especially as time went on. L. Parish, His (Brittanic) Majesty’s consul in Liège, reported to his superior in Brussels that

rumours have reached me of serious acts of indiscipline amongst the Belgian armed forces in this district. Both the French consul and I have been told that scenes have occurred at Hasselt and at Namur. At Namur, I am told (but do not believe it) that actual rioting occurred in which three gendarmes were killed. My French colleague hears that difficulties also

⁴²⁶ Van den Bergen to Commanders of C.A., C.C., T.D.L.N., T.GN.A., D.A.T., Br.A.A.; dated August 30, 1939, in SGRS-S/A Fonds van Overstraeten [henceforth “FVO”] box 1, document 63.

⁴²⁷ King Leopold, quoted in Ministry of National Defense Cabinet to All Army Authorities, Brussels, September 30, 1939, in AMBAE 11177 “Neutralité” Royal Orders of November 10, 1939, in AMBAE 11177 “Neutralité”, *sous-farde* “Legislation et réglements et la Neutralité.”

arose at Mons but this is not in his or my district. At Selzate, near [Ghent], my French colleague has been told by an alleged eye-witness that the troops went on hunger strike, cut telephone wires, etc. [*sic!*]

2. The immediate grievance seems to be the partial or complete suppression of leave. There are also complaints regarding rations, inadequate pay and separation allowances, etc. The fundamental trouble seems to be weariness at prolonged mobilization without any apparent necessity.

Belgian soldiers with specialized training or professions were allowed to go home, with predictably negative impact on the morale of those who had to stay. The mobilization was also hard on the families of the soldiers who were not earning what they had as civilians. Some units lacked almost all discipline while soldiers in garrison provided fertile soil for the pro-German agitation of the VNV and Rex.⁴²⁸

E. Belgian Estimates of German Plans

The Belgians had a very good intelligence service and were well-informed on German intentions. They were particularly well served by their military attaché in Berlin, Colonel Goethals. Some times the signs were large, flashing, and neon. On September 26, 1938—at the height of the Sudeten Crisis—Colonel Georges Goethals reported on a conversation with three German generals who told him “the space necessary for a country in order to assure its existence does not constitute the only guarantee of its subsistence and that a nation which does not ‘drive’ its spirit towards a push abroad must fatally fall into decadence.” Colonel Goethals “signaled” that this declaration had to be taken seriously because the three generals were on the German general staff.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁸ L. Parish to “His Majesty’s Ambassador in Brussels”, letter #29, in MRA-AMB 80/4, #121; De Vos, p. 19.

⁴²⁹ Goethals to *Chef de la Maison Militaire du Roi* [General van Overstraeten], Minister of National Defense, and chief of staff of the army, Brussels, September 26, 1938, annex to AMBAE 11185/1 #6482.

German views of Belgium were signaled by the August 1-3 exercises of *Luftflotte* 2⁴³⁰ reported by Colonel Goethals. The exercise consisted of two warring sides, Red and Blue, separated by two neutral nations, Yellow and Green. Germany and France were separated by three neutral nations, but since Luxembourg is very rarely counted, they were practically separated by two neutral nations. Green remained neutral for the first two days but Yellow, having been overflowed by Red aviation, was considered by Blue to have lost its neutrality. The preferred French air route to hit targets in Germany was via Belgium. On Day 3, Green was persuaded to use its air assets to support Red aviation; Blue considered Green to have lost its neutrality. Colonel Goethals warned that

The situation of the two neutral states situated between the belligerent countries merits the greatest attention.

It is necessary to remark that the Yellow state has, from the beginning of hostilities, been overflowed by Red aviation and that it had instantaneously lost, by that fact, its character of neutrality in the eyes of country Blue, without any trial or demand for explanation imposed by the latter.

Finally, country Green, after having been considered a neutral during two days had equally had its neutrality torn away for “having been convinced to give intelligence to Red aviation” and for having been overflowed several times by the reconnaissance aircraft of the latter.⁴³¹

On October 23, 1939, Colonel Goethals telephoned the *Deuxième Section* of the General Staff⁴³², reporting that the Professional Chamber of the Reich had issued an order “enjoining all the libraries to send immediately all the city plans and road maps of France, Belgium, and Holland to the map depots at Munster or Wiesbaden.” Later that October, he reported again that “numerous collections of maps of Belgium” had been sent to the War Ministry in Berlin and that the maps concentrated on the Dinant-Chimay

⁴³⁰ “Air Fleet 2”—one of four in Germany in 1939—the largest organizational unit of the *Luftwaffe*. *Luftflotte* 2 had its headquarters in Brunswick. Mollo, p. 9.

⁴³¹ Goethals to Maison Militaire du Roi, Ministre de la Défense National, Chef of the E.M.G.A, August 6, 1939, in FVO, Box 1, Doc.# 13, quotes from p. 7.

⁴³² Belgian military intelligence; equivalent of the more famous French *Deuxième Bureau*.

region in the Ardennes and the cartons were labeled “Sambre 25.001-30.000.” This region saw the fatal German breakthrough in May, 1940.⁴³³

Belgium’s first major alert was issued on November 11 in reaction to increasing German press belligerence against Belgium and Holland and the deployment of troops to their borders. German troops were also sent to the frontier with the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, where “along the whole length of the valley of the Our [river], mechanized German troops, all motors running, were signaled as having everywhere pushed the heads of their columns up to the very bridges of the river. At certain points, they had advanced up to the middle of the said bridges. . . .” Warnings were arriving from neutral countries, and information came from German military contacts. In the end, all of these came to naught, Colonel Goethals reported that “[i]t seems to be confirmed that a certain number of military dispositions tending to render possible the almost instantaneous unleashing of several offensive plans had been completed by the date of 11 November. . . .”⁴³⁴

The Belgians received information that the Germans were planning something, whose “principal character. . . will be the seeking of surprise” and took appropriate action, in this case sending a *Chasseurs ardennais* regiment to a newly formed “Group K” and sending two infantry divisions to the K-W Line. Colonel Goethals also noted that “without exaggerating the importance of the repercussions in Berlin of certain military measures taken recently by Belgium and Holland (there is much talk of strategic flooding) as well as the attitude of these two countries, it is necessary to believe that these

⁴³³ Record of telephone conversation from Colonel Goethals to 2ième Section of the E.M.G.A. in FVO Box 2, *sous-farde* October 23, 1939, #568; Record of telephone conversation from Colonel Goethals to 2ième Section of the E.M.G.A., October 28, 1939, at 14 h., in FVO Box 2, *sous-farde* October 28, [1939], #612.

⁴³⁴ CDHFA, pp. 82-3; Crahay, pp. 157-8; Colonel B.E.M. Neefs to Chief of the Historical Section of the Army, Brussels, September 10, 1945, p. 1, in SGRS-S/A “Campagne 1940” “Généralités G2/A/2/C/I; Goethals to Minister of National Defense, Chief of the General Staff of the Army, military house of the king, Berlin, November 13, 1939, p. 1, in FVO Box 2, *sous-farde* “November 13, 1939,” # 792.

elements should, however, be retained.” In the end, a combination of terrible weather and the joint peace appeal of the Belgian and Dutch sovereigns four days earlier ended up forcing the cancellation of a German invasion that *was* planned for the night of November 11-12. The alert was called off on November 13.⁴³⁵

There was also an alert caused by the Mechelen Incident. Alarming news had been steadily coming in from around the turn of the year from diplomatic sources including the Italian ambassador to Berlin, from German generals informing the Belgian minister in Berne that they were prepared to depose Hitler if the Allies agreed to their terms and if not, the invasion would start in January, and from King Leopold’s sister, who was married to the Italian monarch’s son. In addition, German planes were increasingly overflying Belgium. However, in addition to these portents, the Belgians recovered the invasion plans captured by the Meuse.⁴³⁶

The Belgians also had good contacts in the German anti-Hitler resistance. On March 8, 1940, King Leopold concluded, based on reports from his military attachés in Paris, London, and the Hague, that the Allied plan to link up with the Dutch (the so-called “Breda Variant” of Generalissimo Gamelin’s Dyle Plan to advance the Allies into the middle of Belgium along the Dyle River) was almost certainly doomed to failure:

We understand *in fine* the wisdom of the dispositions of the Generalissimo: a less prudent thrust in the direction of Holland would risk having the northern Allied flank crushed against the estuaries of Zeeland at the same time that a German riposte by the Ardennes towards Dinant-Saint Quentin would cut off from Paris the group of armies of assistance, with the hope of driving it back to the Pas de Calais; [a] perspective as disastrous for Belgium as for the Allied cause.

⁴³⁵ Goethals to Minister of National Defense, Chief of the General Staff of the Army, military house of the king, Berlin, November 13, 1939, pp. 1-2.

⁴³⁶ Crahay, p. 158; Vanwelkenhuyzen, *Neutralité Armée*, p. 79.

This is very close to what actually happened! British historian Brian Bond notes that “in justice to the Belgian High Command, it must be said that their reading of German intentions from the end of January was in the main sound and that they did attempt to alert the French.” Jean Vanwelkenhuyzen notes that although the Belgians had recognized that there would be a German attack through the Ardennes, the Belgian General Staff did *not* recognize it as the main thrust, believing rather that the German maneuver would be a double envelopment, with one axis of advance running from Maeseyck to Brussels north of Liège and the other running from St. Vith to Chimay through the Ardennes. The defense of the Ardennes took on a secondary importance because the main thrust was believed to be the northern one. The *Chasseurs ardennais* would be expected to withdraw to rejoin the main body of the army after conducting their demolitions and delaying the Germans.⁴³⁷

F. Relations with the Allies

Theoretically, under Belgian “scrupulous neutrality,” the Belgians could not have any relations with the Allies that they refused to the Germans. This meant that the Belgian General Staff could not share military secrets with the Allies and not with the Germans. Nevertheless, the rules were bent somewhat and the Belgian military still showed favoritism towards the Allies. This is illustrated by a 1937 report regarding “the attitude of the Belgian General Staff towards the French Military Attaché, Colonel Laurent, and myself. . .” from British military attaché Lieutenant-Colonel Paris to Sir

⁴³⁷ Leopold III quoted in van Overstraeten, diary entry for March 8, 1940, p. 520; Bond, *Britain, France, and Belgium*, p. 46; Keyes, p. 130; Vanwelkenhuyzen, *Neutralité Armée*, pp. 111, 119-122; Crahay, p. 194.

Noël Charles, the chargé d'affaires at the embassy. Belgian chief of staff Lieutenant-General Van den Bergen

agreed that Colonel Laurent should do a tour of the Eastern and Northern defensive systems and smilingly concurred that the visit should take place in September, as this would be before the arrival of the new resident German military attaché in October. . . . I conclude from the foregoing incidents that the Belgian General Staff, while still holding to their avowed policy of strict equality of treatment to foreign Military Attachés, have reverted to their former methods and are treating my French colleague and myself in a distinctly favoured manner.⁴³⁸

Earlier that year, Major (as he was then) Paris reported receiving from the Belgian General Staff two “questionnaires” addressed to their military attaché in London “with the request that I should beg the War Office to give full replies. . . .” The interpretation by the British diplomats and soldier in Brussels was that the Belgians were essentially still conducting staff talks, only in a new fashion. Sir Esmond Ovey, the ambassador, believed the Belgians were acting thus to give the lie to Belgian Foreign Minister Spaak’s declaration that the era of staff talks was over. The Belgians were indicating that the declaration “should not be taken too seriously and be regarded as an indication that Belgium wants to keep close contact with her old allies through the recognized channels without publishing the fact to the world that contact is being maintained.” In fact, at the king’s instigation, clandestine exchanges of military information between France and Belgium *via* the French military attaché in Brussels had been going on from October 1936 and would continue until the German invasion (when relations became overt), intensifying after the January 1940 alert. The Belgians, for their part, passed documents to the French, including information on the Antwerp and Liège fortifications, on the Antwerp-Namur (K-W) line, maps of the Belgian deployment on the Meuse and Albert

⁴³⁸ D.K. Paris to Sir Noël Charles, Brussels, August 20, 1937, in MRA-AMB 80/3/XIII, #228-9.

Canal, and information on usable Belgian roads. French military attaché Colonel Laurent was allowed to visit military works under a false identity. A January 1937 British document regarding Belgian requests for munitions from the United Kingdom indicates that the Cabinet “authorize[d] conversations between the Belgian Military Attaché and the War Office in order to ascertain exactly what the Belgian request amounted to, and to endeavour in every possible way to meet it.”⁴³⁹

On May 11, 1939, the British ambassador and military attaché in Brussels attended a dinner with the Belgian chief of staff, general officers, and the commander and officers of the Belgian Regiment of Grenadiers. Other guests included the Dutch minister, the German and Italian ambassadors, and their military attachés. Invited but absent were the French and American representatives although their military attachés did attend. At this party, the national anthems of all the represented countries were played. British Ambassador Clive reported that

I could not avoid the impression that this large dinner party. . . was in a sense a demonstration of Belgian neutrality, or, as they would prefer to call it, independence, and yet the feelings of the officers present were unmistakable. Both the Colonel of the Regiment in his speech of welcome to the guests and the Chief of the General Staff who replied (none of the foreign guests made a speech) ended up with a peroration about Belgian determination to resist attacks from any quarter. This was cheered to the echo by all present except the German and Italian Ambassadors who looked very sheepish and extremely uncomfortable. The Dutch Minister and I less vociferously but discreetly applauded.

At the same dinner, Ambassador Clive discussed with General Van den Bergen the defenses of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. Van den Bergen refused to answer pending “very careful consideration” but noted Luxembourg’s long frontier. He did mention that

⁴³⁹ Sir Esmond Ovey to Anthony Eden, Brussels, May 4, 1937 in MRA-AMB 80/3/XIII, #190; D.K. Paris to Sir Esmond Ovey, Brussels, May 4, 1937 in MRA-AMB 80/3/XIII, #191; Keyes, p. 115; CDHFA, p. 87; ECNRS, p. 35; “Extract from Cabinet Conclusions 1(37) of January 13th, 1937” in MRA-AMB 80/3/XIII, #20.

“measures were being taken to increase the defenses in the Belgian province of Luxembourg which would delay an invader until ‘help came from the French.’ This remark struck me as of special interest.”⁴⁴⁰

There were, however, lengths to which the Belgian military was not allowed to go in showing favoritism. In April 1939, the Belgian Foreign Ministry refused an unofficial request, previously accepted by the Belgian Ministry of National Defense, for an exchange of officers between Belgium and Britain. The reason given by the Belgian military attaché in London was that if such a request was accepted, there would be no justification to refuse a similar German request in the future. In fact, the top Belgian generals wanted staff talks but did not control policy or reflect Belgian popular opinion.⁴⁴¹

In early 1939, Belgian emissaries went to the United States in search of supplies. Unfortunately, the Americans had nothing to spare. They suggested talking to the British. However, Baron van Zuylen of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, estimated the policy of “independence” “would be seriously threatened the day where we would depend exclusively on England and France for the delivery of our resupply in provisions and in munitions.”⁴⁴²

On October 27, 1939, King Leopold followed up on an invitation to address the American people on radio to explain the Belgian position. He argued that Belgium was “acting in defense of [Christian] civilization by the attitude it has taken amidst the conflict that has broken out in Europe. . . .” By remaining neutral, Belgium could act as a

⁴⁴⁰ Ambassador Clive to Viscount Halifax, Brussels, May 12, 1939, in MRA-AMB 80/4/XIV, #s 151, 152.

⁴⁴¹ Major Douglas Brown, record, April 13, 1939, in MRA AMB 80/4/XIV, #35; Col. Paris to Clive cited in Alexander, pp. 33-4.

⁴⁴² Diary entry for April 5, 1939, in van Overstraeten, p. 331.

buffer between the French and the Germans, preventing the kind of destruction of the Great War. He informed the Americans that Belgium's major neighbors not only recognized the new Belgian status of "independence" but guaranteed Belgium's inviolability. Thus, the Belgian declaration of neutrality was "logical" and "in accord with both the traditions and aspirations of the Belgian people, whose feelings have evolved from age-old struggles. The Belgian nation, which is the very incarnation of the sense of individual liberty, gave its blood to win its institutions in an unflinching determination to remain itself." Moreover, Belgium, a "small but one of the most thickly populated" countries, needed neutrality because it was dependant on trade for its survival, needing both foodstuffs and raw materials to be paid for through exports. In addition, "we have no ambitions for territorial expansion. Neither had we any part whatever in the happenings that brought about the conflict to-day dividing Europe. If we became involved in the fray, it is on our soil that the issue would be fought out, and in view of the small size of our territory, that would spell utter destruction for Belgium. . . ." Thus, King Leopold returned to one of the master thoughts of interwar Belgian defense and foreign policy: Belgium must do everything possible to avoid being involved in a war because a war would literally destroy the country. All the Belgian leaders had lived through the Great War and were desperate to avoid a similar catastrophe in the future. He informed American listeners (this went out at 8:30pm, New York time) that it was exactly twenty-five years ago that the Belgian Army under King Albert had stopped "the progress of a cruel invasion." He promised that "[i]f we were attacked—and pray God this may not happen—in violation of the solemn and definite undertakings that were given us in 1937 and were renewed at the outset of the present war, we would not hesitate to fight with the

same conviction but with forces ten times stronger.” This was the result of the improvements of the Belgian Army in the 1930s, especially after the 1936 military bill made possible by the declaration of “independence.”⁴⁴³

The Belgians never lost faith in Allied assistance, even after the declaration of “neutrality.” In December 1938, General van Overstraeten noted a possible German axis of attack as perpendicular to SE-NW and, while urging new plans of retreat, noted that the Ardennes divides the “Outre-Meuse” region (“Beyond the Meuse”) into two parts: “Condroz north of the forest, and Luxembourg” to the south. Belgians would organize the delaying action in Condroz, the French would be responsible for Luxembourg.⁴⁴⁴

Once the German against the Anglo-French-Polish (but mostly Polish) war began, the Belgians were almost literally incessantly bombarded with demands to let the Allied troops in, or at least to have staff talks. These demands frequently came close to outright bullying. On September 23, 1939, British Lord Halifax, the foreign secretary, pressed the Belgian ambassador on this subject, warning that, absent previous coordination, Britain would be unable to defend Belgium “in conjunction with the Belgian Army, but it would become a military necessity to take immediate action against the German invading forces in Belgium.” In other words, the British would bomb German forces with, inevitably, Belgian civilians becoming what a later war would term “collateral damage.” The Belgian ambassador, despite not thinking a German attack on his country “either imminent or probable,” “said with great emphasis that it was really quite impossible for them to do what we asked; it was the very thing which the Germans were on the lookout

⁴⁴³ Leopold III to the American People (in English), pp. 1-2, in FVO Box 2, *sous-farde* October 27 [1939], no. 599.

⁴⁴⁴ Colloque Franco-Belge quoted in Jean Vanwelkenhuyzen, “La Défense des Ardennes en 1939-40” in *Revue Internationale d’Histoire Militaire* 29 (1970), p. 874.

for; it would be quite impossible to keep it secret, for we must clearly tell the French, with whom nothing was secret. The only effect would be to bring on Belgium the certainty of a disaster.”⁴⁴⁵

Again the Belgians had to keep in mind the main goal of Belgian policy— to avoid being drawn into a war or, failing that, to be able to face the trial united, without having previously shown partiality and thus alienating one or another segment of the population. Former Prime Minister van Zeeland told a Briton that “the essential thing from [the Belgian] point of view was to have a united country, and for that purpose they must be able to say, if and when trouble came, that any German attack on Belgium was completely unprovoked. If it ever came out that they had had staff conversations, this defence in his view would no longer be valid.”⁴⁴⁶ The Belgians got scant sympathy. A secret report from the Belgian military attaché in Paris on October 3, 1939 reported that he had been told by a British colonel that “after the war it is probable that the vanquishing Allies would have to take measures *vis-à-vis* the small countries in order that they can no longer thwart the military measures of the great countries struggling at the same time for themselves and for the little countries.” In the middle of October, 1939, French military attaché Colonel Laurent took to “indiscreetly” visiting the Belgian headquarters “nearly daily, without him having anything interesting to say. . . . One can ask oneself if the French, not succeeding in bringing the Belgian Government to conclude military accords, do not want to give the impression that the conversations exist on this subject in a manner to compromise us.” In other words, the French may have thought that

⁴⁴⁵ Halifax to Clive, September 23, 1939, p.1, in MRA-AMB 80/4 #175.

⁴⁴⁶ Signature illegible, note received September 29, 1939 in MRA-AMB 80/4, #198-200.

if the Belgians were convinced the Germans believed staff talks were occurring, the Belgians might conclude that they might as well have the talks.⁴⁴⁷

Although most of the “requests” made by the Allies had the same character as those made above (if not necessarily as extreme), there was a little bit of understanding for Colonel Delvoie, the Belgian military attaché in Paris, who noted that the head of French military intelligence “told me today that our position is completely logical, that if Belgium took its place at the side of the Allies, without a German invasion imposing it, it would only result in an extension of the battlefront.” The Belgians were, as the ambassador evidenced, also quite aware of the weaknesses of their suitors. On April 11, General van Overstraeten rejected an Allied plea based on the *Luftwaffe* being busy in Norway and the Allies having thus a better shot at reaching the Albert Canal without being attacked by air. He noted that if the *Luftwaffe* was busy in Norway, then so was the Royal Air Force, so there would be no air cover.⁴⁴⁸

The Belgians were so concerned to keep their appearance of neutrality that their military attaché in London was instructed that “except in periods of crisis. . . he is not to do anything which might be taken by the Germans as indicative of close touch with the British War Office. This applies particularly to exchange of information.” British ambassador to Brussels Sir Robert Clive reported to Sir Alexander Cadogan, the permanent undersecretary of the Foreign Office in London that the king and his advisors, both Secretary Robert Capelle and General van Overstraeten, shared the belief that Belgium could only stay out of the war if it “shut down any conversations with us or the

⁴⁴⁷ “Extrait du Rapport no. 1 O.D./5648/195c du 3-10-1930 de notre Attaché Militaire à Paris” in AMBAE 11185/1 (the cover letter is from General Derousseaux to Pierre van Zuylen and is dated October 6, 1939); Pierre van Zuylen for the Minister, Brussels, October 18, 1939, pp. 1-2, in AMBAE 11185/1, “Politique Militaire.”

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.; diary entry for April 11, 1940 in van Overstraeten, p. 550.

French, which might conceivably compromise them if known in any other quarter. . . .”

The Belgians knew enough about the Germans and about modern war to fear, given Belgium’s weak anti-aircraft defense, “that a German attack this time would be heralded by a mass bombardment of every railway junction in order to disorganize mobilization.” In a country as densely populated as Belgium, this would be a disaster—one the Belgians hoped to avoid “by maintaining a rigid neutrality.”⁴⁴⁹

Nevertheless, there was hidden cooperation. Starting on November 19, 1939, Generalissimo Gamelin sent “suggestions” to try to coordinate Belgian and French responses to a German invasion and gave suggestions for study by the Belgians. Among these suggestions were the organization of the K-W Line, the improvement of defenses to be used by the French as well as the defense of the routes to be taken by the French, the stockpiling of engineering supplies for the Wavre-Namur position, and the plans for the demolitions in the Ardennes with orders given to the *Chasseurs ardennais* as to the direction of retreat so as to prevent getting tangled up in advancing French columns.⁴⁵⁰

On February 14, 1940, General van Overstraeten established a plan for the road and rail travel of the Allies potentially coming to Belgium’s aid on the Louvain-Namur line. He expected eight Allied divisions on that line by the morning of the fourth day after the invasion with another six or eight motorized divisions reinforcing the Belgian dispositions further east. The cooperation was not perfect. For example, after the Mechelen Incident, General van Overstraeten sent only an “insufficient and erroneous” letter detailing the German plans to Generalissimo Gamelin and refused to give the Allies copies of the documents. On the other hand, after warning the French about a German

⁴⁴⁹ Major Douglas Brown, record, April 6, 1939, in MRA-AMB 80/4/XIV, #36; Clive to Cadogan, March 17, 1939, in MRA-AMB 80/4/XIV, #10-11.

⁴⁵⁰ ECNRS, pp. 35, 97; CDHFA, p. 87.

thrust coming through the Ardennes driving towards the Meuse, the French did nothing. “Listened to, the warning would have had the happiest results. But the representative of the Belgian high command was not authorized to visit the [French] defenses on the Meuse, and his confidences earned him the firmest assurances on the solidity of the barrage that commanded the exits of the Ardennes and of Luxembourg.”⁴⁵¹

There was more friction during the Mechelen Incident. Not only did the Belgians provide incomplete information about the recovered German plans, but after they did so, King Leopold chose that time to ask for “Allied guarantees for the future of Belgium and the Congo.” He wanted those assurances before inviting the Allies in. He made the request through British war hero and close friend of both Albert and Leopold, Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, who flew to Belgium for the purpose. Afterwards, Keyes was grounded by the same fog that had tripped up the German aviators. He therefore had to relay the request by phone to his boss, First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill. Historian Ernest May notes: “As often happens in telephone communication, what was heard differed from what was said.” The British interpreted this request for guarantees as an invitation for the Allies to enter as long as the king could justify it to his government by producing the promises. Churchill summoned the War Cabinet and then the full Cabinet and urged, as did General Ironside, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, immediate acceptance and entry into Belgium. However, Prime Minister Chamberlain, correctly realizing that Leopold had no intention of inviting the Allies in preemptively, won out. The British sent a message back to the king saying they were “ready to accept the

⁴⁵¹ Diary entry for February 14, 1940, in van Overstraeten, p. 523; CDHFA, p. 83; Vanwelkenhuyzen, *Neutralité Armée*, p. 121.

invitation of the Belgian government” to enter the country although they could not make the requested promises. The Belgians demurred.⁴⁵²

On the 14th of January, the French noticed the obstructions barring the routes into Belgium were gone and were also informed of the purported Belgian invitation. They immediately sent their troops to the Belgian border (in one case actually entering Belgium) through “calf-deep snow.” However, the next day the obstacles were back up. Gamelin was understandably upset. The Belgian ambassador was summoned to French Prime Minister Daladier and told that the French were ready to aid the Belgians but could not stay long in their current positions and would go home if they were not invited in. The Belgian was also told the French army could not repeat this maneuver every time there was an alert and that henceforth the Allies would only move *after* the Germans invaded Belgium, thus potentially causing significant delays. The Belgians had until 8PM to decide. Upon hearing of this, Leopold summoned van Overstraeten and his ministers and after a short meeting, Foreign Minister Spaak called Paris “to say that Belgium had never had any intention of inviting pre-emptive Allied military moves and that they were mystified as to why Daladier thought otherwise.” Ernest May notes that “[i]rritation and mystification lingered in all three capitals.”⁴⁵³

Certain issues had still not been resolved by May 10th. These included the passage of British troops through Brussels, which had been declared an open city by the Belgians, due to lack of enough adequate routes of march, and whether the Belgians or British would be responsible for the defense of Louvain.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵² May, pp. 317-18.

⁴⁵³ May, pp. 319-321; *Relations militaires Franco-belges* quoted in May, p. 320; Howard-Vyse report cited in *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁴ CDHFA, p. 87.

On March 28, 1940, French military attaché General Laurent described a conversation with General van Overstraeten in which the latter insisted on keeping Brussels and Louvain in the Belgian sector and urged Allied reinforcements for the Albert Canal. The Belgians wanted Brussels in their sector of the line because they planned to declare it an open city and they wanted to deprive the Germans of any excuse to bomb their capital. General Laurent responded, regarding the reinforcements, that they could not go as far as the Albert Canal and would have to limit themselves to the Namur-Louvain line. Also during the conversation, General van Overstraeten supported the Allied plan to link up with the Dutch *provided the Allies did not go past Turnhout-Tilburg*. The Belgians, for their part, would not advance past the Turnhout Canal. This latter statement by van Overstraeten is interesting because, as we have seen, he recorded in an earlier diary entry that the Allied mission to the Dutch could (almost certainly would) end in disaster.⁴⁵⁵

On April 11, 1940, Colonel Delvoie reported from Allied Headquarters in the Château of Vincennes that French Generalissimo Gamelin could not promise to get troops to the Albert Canal. Earlier indications of this had led the Belgians to make its new main line of resistance the K-W Line running from Antwerp to Namur. General van Overstraeten was completely in accord, noting that it was unreasonable to expect the Allies to man the longer front of the Albert Canal because they would lack the manpower “and its path would predispose them to be cut off from French territory by an enemy reaction emerging from the Ardennes. *Honestly, Belgium can neither require nor expect that the Franco-British will exceed Antwerp-Namur with their forces*”[emphasis in the original]. That same day, General van Overstraeten rejected a French offer to send

⁴⁵⁵ General Laurent to French Minister of National Defense, March 28, 1940, quoted in ECNRS, p. 122.

equipment and materiel for the depots supporting the Wavre-Namur position because General Denis felt he could stock them but van Overstraeten said he would like the materiel already ordered from France and past due.⁴⁵⁶

Two days later, van Overstraeten's diary entry encapsulates Belgium's position: the king "refuses to think that the Allies would disregard our refusal" to invite them in before an invasion but one infantry division would be sent to reinforce troops south of Brussels and the General Staff would plan for several army corps to shift facing south "for the case where our confidence would be disappointed; *but only by way of [covering all the bases], because it is important not to become scarce on the eastern side.* [my emphasis]" Belgium still had absolute faith in the Allies, nevertheless was forced to at least consider defenses against them while still being convinced that the enemy would be Germany. That day at noon, the movement of the 10th Infantry Division south was suspended after hearing from General Delvoie in Paris while the Belgian ambassadors in London and Paris were ordered to get an explanation for Allied movements to the Belgian border.⁴⁵⁷

G. Relations with the Dutch

There is an interesting parallel between Belgium's relations with the Allies and Holland's relations with Belgium. Just as the Belgians were bombarded with demands for consultations and talks, the Belgians themselves bombarded the Dutch with similar demands and received similar responses. The Dutch had remained neutral during the Great War and hoped to repeat their "miracle." A verbal note discussing Dutch-Belgian military relations pointed out that the strict neutrality held to by both countries prevented

⁴⁵⁶ van Overstraeten, diary entry for April 11, 1940, pp. 549,551.

⁴⁵⁷ van Overstraeten, diary entry for April 13, 1940, p. 553.

them from coordinating their defensive plans while the sharing of information *via* military attachés was extremely limited.⁴⁵⁸

The Belgian ambassador in Berlin reported that the Germans opposed any Belgian-Dutch military alliance and “[t]hey seem to consider in effect that such a combination would be of a nature to compromise gravely the status of independence of the two countries and that it would place Germany in the necessity of reconsidering its current attitude with regard to Belgium.” The fear was that a Belgo-Dutch block would join the Anglo-French. In fact, the Belgian military attaché in the Hague, Colonel B.E.M. Diepenrykx, did have much closer ties with the Dutch military than did his British, French, or German colleagues, but he concealed the fact so as to avoid anything that could seem to the other attachés like collaboration between the Belgian and Dutch staffs.⁴⁵⁹

After initially refusing an exchange of information between staffs because he thought it was incompatible with the policy of neutrality, Major General Carstens, the chief of the Dutch general staff, agreed to Colonel Diepenrykx’s proposal after being persuaded it would not entail collaboration between general staffs. The exchange would be limited to information allowing the two armies to link up in the event of a German invasion of both countries. At the very least, each needed to know some of the dispositions of the other. The issue was brought to the Dutch commander-in-chief, General Reynders, who agreed to “discreet contacts.” The foreign and defense ministers

⁴⁵⁸ J. Vanwelkenhuyzen, “Note sur les relations entre la Belgique et les Pays-Bas en 1939-1940”, p. 1, in SGRS-S/A “Campagne 1940”, Généralités G1 A/2/b/III/7; “Note Verbale”, p. 2, in AMBAE 11984, *sous-farde* “relations hollandais-belges 1939-1941”.

⁴⁵⁹ Davignon to Pierlot [foreign minister], Berlin, May 20, 1939, in AMBAE 11185/1, #3587; FVO, Box 2, *sous-farde* 27 Octobre [1939], #598.

were not to be kept in the loop but the chiefs of staff were.⁴⁶⁰ The plan almost immediately ran into a roadblock thanks to a verbal slip by King Leopold. Colonel Diepenrykx recalled a conversation between Leopold and Dutch Queen Wilhelmina on the occasion of the latter's visit to the Brussels Exposition.

The King believed [himself] able to emphasize the friendly relations between the Belgian and Dutch general staffs. This assertion of the King, which besides rested on nothing concrete, provoked the most lively reaction from the Queen. From her return to the Hague, the Queen summoned her minister of foreign affairs to ask him if it were true that relations existed between the Belgian and Dutch general staffs and, when he answered in the affirmative, ordered him to put an end to them as quickly as possible.⁴⁶¹

In early 1940, the Dutch were sufficiently afraid of Germany to discuss some coordination with Belgium. The Belgian high command was requested to align its defenses with the southern end of the Dutch Raam-Peel position, on which the latter planned to make their stand. The Dutch feared a German thrust going below their positions and taking their line from the rear. The Belgians, although concluding that the terrain was unsuitable for the Germans and “the gap in the defensive system [between the Raam-Peel position and the Belgian canal de junction] is more apparent than real,” were willing to align some “light elements and artillery” with the Dutch, but not to go as far as was hoped in The Hague because the Belgians could not do so without weakening the Albert Canal defenses. The junction canal was not suitable as a main defensive position, and the Belgians did not think the Raam-Peel position would hold the Germans

⁴⁶⁰ FVO, Box 2, *sous-farde* 26 Octobre [1939], #591; Col. B.E.M. Diepenrykx, “Objet: Considérations au sujet de ma mission à La Haye”, London, January 2, 1941, pp. 1-2, in AMBAE 11984, *sous-farde* “relations hollands-belges 1939-1941”.

⁴⁶¹ Diepenrykx, “Objet: Considérations au sujet de ma mission à La Haye”, p. 1.

anyway.⁴⁶² The Belgian counterproposal, supported by French Generalissimo Gamelin, was for a Dutch position further west to link the Dutch national redoubt, “*Vesting Holland*” (“Fortress Holland”), with the Belgian K-W Line but the Dutch did not want to abandon their Raam-Peel position. They realized they were too weak to defend the entire country and “by a quite natural reflex, the Dutch leaders thus concerned themselves with the defense of the most populous and richest provinces” comprising *Vesting Holland*.⁴⁶³

There was thus a fatal disjunction between the Dutch and Belgian plans. On April 11, 1940, French military attaché Colonel Hautcoeur visited General van Overstraeten and asked whether the Belgians could link up with the Dutch until the French arrived. Van Overstraeten responded by citing his fear that the Germans would punch through the Dutch, turn the Belgians from the north, and go on to Antwerp.⁴⁶⁴

Paralleling the sometimes thorny relations between the Belgians and the French were problems between Holland and Belgium. In December 1939, the Belgian ambassador in the Hague, Baron Herry, had warned Foreign Minister Spaak that to avoid reigniting ancient Dutch hostility to Belgium, the initiative for joint staff talks must come from Holland.” Presumably, he was ignorant of Colonel Diepenrykx’s activities.⁴⁶⁵

The Belgians were very concerned about an invasion by Germany of Holland alone. On January 23, 1939, General Denis told the British military attaché that if Holland were invaded, “Belgium would certainly intervene.” On September 14, General

⁴⁶² It didn’t. Due in part to German special operations which seized bridges allowing troops to attack the Dutch from the rear, the Raam-Peel position was abandoned during the night of May 10-11, 1940. P.L.G. Doorman, *Military Operations in the Netherlands from 10th-17th May 1940*, Trans. S.L. Salzedo (Guilford and Esher, UK: George Allen and Unwin for the Netherlands Government Information Bureau, 1944), pp. 49-52.

⁴⁶³ Vanwelkenhuyzen, “Note sur les relations,” p. 2; Colonel B.E.M. Diepenrykx, untitled, London, September 18, 1941, p. 5, in AMBAE 11984, *sous-farde* “relations hollando-belges 1939-1941.”

⁴⁶⁴ Diary entry for April 11, 1940 in van Overstraeten, p. 549.

⁴⁶⁵ Alexander, p. 10

van Overstraeten concluded that a German attack limited to the Netherlands would render Belgium's continued neutrality impossible. "Militarily," he wrote, "the presence of the Germans at Breda and that of the Allies at Maubeuge and Lille, at less than one motorized march or half an hour by plane from Brussels, would render our position untenable. Thus, any German penetration into Holland would drive Belgium into the war." The only question was on which side to intervene? However, as Colonel Requette had written in *XXe Siècle* on April 24, 1939, if Holland were invaded, Belgium could not send troops because it would have to protect its own border with Germany and the reciprocal was true for the Dutch. The issue of Belgium granting permission to French troops to aid Holland was moot because the French had not, and perhaps never would, make such a request. He ended by urging Belgium to remain completely independent.⁴⁶⁶

In the end, French motorized troops, which had initially been intended as theater reserves, were sent to link up with the Dutch and were driven back, as were the Dutch forces. There was little junction between the Belgians and the Dutch except in Zeeland. Holland, realizing the hopelessness of the situation with no Allied aid expected and the Germans threatening, after destroying Rotterdam from the air, to do the same to other cities, capitulated most of its forces on May 14. Forces in Zeeland continued to fight alongside the French for a few more days. The Dutch credit their forces in South Limburg with delaying the German attack on the Albert Canal for a day and for keeping a German force of 250,000 men away from Belgium and France for "five days, plus the time required for regrouping and transfer to the fighting areas in Belgium and northern France—another four days at least" and with inflicting heavy losses on that force. It is,

⁴⁶⁶ General Denis quoted in Alexander, *Le "Cas Hollande"*, p. 19; Van Overstraeten, quoted in ECNRS, pp. 81-82; C. Requette, "Entente militaire hollando-belge?", *XXe Siècle*, April 24, 1939, in AMBAE 11185/1.

unfortunately, not within the scope of this work to devote to the Dutch military, its planning, and its defense, the attention they deserve but it is to be hoped some historian will reexamine the subject.⁴⁶⁷

H. The Last Alert

The ultimate alert, the one that terminated in the German invasion on May 10, 1940, began on May 9 from a number of sources. That evening,

the telephones of the *2e Section* rang without stop. On the whole front from Holland up to the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg German forces were in movement. . . . The entire length of our frontier, our advanced elements perceived the noise of troops being assembled, the calls and the commands made by the officers, and, dominating it all, the uninterrupted noise of motors turning over.

Similar information was registered from the Dutch and Luxembourgish borders. The activity was unprecedented since September 1939. Also on May 9, Colonel Goethals was told that “the Führer has decided today afternoon on the unleashing of the general offensive on the Holland-Belgium-Luxembourg front May 10 at dawn. A counter-order, still possible, cannot however be given after 21 hours [9pm] for technical reasons.”

Goethals immediately telegraphed the information to Brussels. At 9:30, an informant told Colonel Goethals that the counter-order had not been given. He telephoned (in code) a confirmation of the previous message at 10:30pm, after an unusual 30 minute delay. At 12:30am, the Colonel tried to telephone Brussels to see whether the lines had been cut. The line was not working. Goethals then went to try to reach the German ministers of foreign affairs, defense, and the commander of the *Wehrmacht*, all of whom were

⁴⁶⁷ Doorman, pp. 86, 90.

sleeping. At 5am, Ambassador Davignon summoned the colonel to the embassy because the ambassador had been summoned to the German Foreign Ministry.⁴⁶⁸

In Brussels, where the movement of a German armored division was the only information out of the ordinary, although the adjunct Dutch military attaché reported German troops prepared to march into Holland and requested information, General van Overstraeten did not believe an attack was imminent, noting that the Germans seemed less active than previously. He so informed the responsible authorities, including the Palace and the Ministry of National Defense. Major Buisseret, who was then a captain serving in the 2eme *Section*, notes “There was manifestly under these commentaries a care for prudence brought on by the events of January 13 following which the Cabinet imputed to the E.M.G.A. a faculty of flights of enthusiasm and an excessive pessimism.” III Army Corps was ordered to confirm the Dutch information and responded that the German radio traffic was normal.⁴⁶⁹

At 8:30pm, Brussels time, the telegram from Goethals was received. The intelligence sections of “Group K” in the Ardennes and III Army Corps were alerted. After 10pm, “the information began to flood in. The first reports were negative, but they rapidly gave way to positive information.” The noise of the German preparations mentioned above erased the last doubts. Then Colonel Goethal’s phone call reached Belgian military intelligence. General van Overstraeten “remained circumspect.” Other information reached the Belgians, including a 3am Dutch report of massive overflights by German aircraft flying west and then at 3:30 reports of similar overflights through

⁴⁶⁸“Les alertes des 11 novembre 1939, 11 janvier, et 10 mai 1940”, pp. 2-3; Major B.E.M. Léon Buisseret, “Alerte du 9 Mai 1940”, pp. 1-2, in SGRS-S/A “Campagne 1940” Généralités G1/A/2/C/V/6.

⁴⁶⁹ Major B.E.M. Léon Buisseret, “Alerte du 9 Mai 1940”, pp. 1-2, in SGRS-S/A “Campagne 1940” Généralités G1/A/2/C/V/5.

Belgian airspace. As Colonel Goethals had warned, the attack came on May 10 at dawn.⁴⁷⁰

I. The Forces Involved in the May 1940 Campaign

The Belgian Army on May 10, 1940 constituted eighteen infantry divisions (c.17,000 men each), two *Chasseurs ardennais* divisions, two cavalry divisions grouped into the Cavalry Corps, a heavy artillery division, two fortress artillery divisions, a fortress infantry regiment, and Frontier Cyclist units. The total was about 650,000 men, or about 8% of the population. As we have seen, this army was short on tanks and anti-aircraft weapons. Historian Luc De Vos laments the lack of motorization in the Belgian Army although the official history of the Belgian Army argues that it was in fact “relatively mobile” with 16.5 cyclist regiments, 6 groups and 12 squadrons of divisional cyclists, 8.5 regiments on motorcycles, and two regiments transported by truck, in addition to the 57 regiments on foot. Of its 1,338 pieces of artillery, very few were motorized outside of the Cavalry Corps and the *Chasseurs ardennais*. The Belgian air force was generally agreed to have been pathetically weak. It had “nearly 140” combat aircraft of which only 118 were usable. Most were at best obsolescent except for 24 British-made Hawker Hurricanes which would end up being destroyed on the ground in the early hours of the German attack.⁴⁷¹

Alongside the Belgians was the miniscule approximately 425-strong Luxembourg Volunteer Company. Luxembourg hoped to delay an invader by obstructing the routes from the German and French borders. The Luxembourgers, however, were ordered not to defend these obstructions because “the use of arms, like that of explosives, was

⁴⁷⁰ Major B.E.M. Léon Buisseret, pp. 2-5.

⁴⁷¹ De Vos, pp. 28-29; CDHFA, pp. 87-88.

prohibited in order not to indispose the invader and to avoid reprisals. Like the Belgians, the Luxembourgers counted on a prompt and efficacious French intervention.⁴⁷²

Also alongside the Belgians were the stronger Dutch Armed forces. On May 1940, they counted about 280,000 men grouped into four army corps, each of two divisions, plus two Hussar regiments, a regiment of corps artillery including only one brigade of three batteries, the corps train, twenty-four reserve brigades, twenty-four frontier battalions, fourteen regiments of army artillery, and other troops. This force was desperately weak in artillery, both in number of tubes and modernity of guns. It also lacked anti-tank guns and anti-aircraft defense. The soldiers were also poorly trained. The Dutch had only 40 tanks and 125 planes, of which only half were modern.⁴⁷³

More significant was the British Expeditionary Force, commanded by Lord Gort, 450,000 well-trained and mostly professional “Tommys” strong, in Thirteen divisions (later joined by two more), completely motorized, with 640 tanks, including heavy Mark II Matilda tanks with 80mm armor, almost impervious to German shells. The BEF was supported by 456 planes on the continent and another 850 based in the British Isles.⁴⁷⁴

The main hope of the small nations in Europe was the French Army, generally considered (outside of Germany) to be the best in the world. In 1939, Winston Churchill said “Thank God for the French Army.” The number of French divisions varies according to the historian. Julian Jackson noted that France had 99 divisions, of which 13 were fortress divisions, while Luc De Vos counted 117 divisions, of which 104 were in the north-east. De Fabribeckers counted 105, including one Polish division and three light

⁴⁷² Vic Jaeger, *Les Insignes de l'Armée Luxembourgeoise et des Luxembourgeois dans les Armées Alliées* (NL: Saint Paul, 1995), p. 17; de Fabribeckers, p. 105.

⁴⁷³ Doorman, pp. 17-20; De Vos, pp. 30-1.

⁴⁷⁴ De Vos, pp. 31.

divisions that ended up intervening in Norway. France had about 2.24 million soldiers under arms, or about 12% of the population. France had, by one estimate, 2,263 modern tanks, 743 armored cars, and another 540 obsolete models. The French Somua medium tanks was considered among the best in the world for the time while the B1 and B1bis were as heavy as anything the Germans had. Seventy-five percent had at least 40mm armor and a 47mm or 75mm gun, while the B1 series had both. Unfortunately, these tanks were rarely used in a modern fashion as an armored striking force. They were most often used to support the infantry and were dispersed in small groups among the infantry divisions—the French had only four heavy armored divisions (including one, under Colonel Charles de Gaulle, being formed). France, with more tanks than the Germans, achieved only local superiority in tank-on-tank battles. One is reminded of the later-war battles between the Tiger and the Sherman, with the more numerous and mobile Shermans (the 1940 Germans) eventually destroying the heavier but harder to use and less mobile Tigers (the 1940 French).⁴⁷⁵

The French were in the process of digesting the lessons of the Polish campaign when the Germans invaded the west. The French were generally foot-mobile and short of air power. France had 3,097 planes on May 10, 1940, with only 879 set to defend northeastern France. Here, as in tanks, resources were ill-used. Among the French planes was the Dewoitine D-520, a modern fighter equal to anything in the *Luftwaffe*. The French planned for a long war and did not want to risk all their assets right away, keeping many in reserve and dispersing others on many targets at the same time. However, the Germans

⁴⁷⁵ Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), p. 33; De Vos, pp. 32-3.

fought for a short war and achieved air superiority making movement of troops by day hellishly difficult. It also made French bombers easy targets.⁴⁷⁶

Against the Allies stood the *Wehrmacht*, 156 Divisions strong, with twenty-one busy in Norway, Denmark, and Poland, leaving 135 divisions, or nearly 3 million men, plus the 100,000 men of the *Waffen-SS* for the Campaign in the West. 93 divisions took part in the initial offensive. The Germans had 7,378 tubes of artillery, compared to the 10,700 possessed by France alone. They also had 10 modern armored divisions, each with 12-14,000 men and 150-340 tanks, with most being light Panzer Is and IIs, for a total of 3,505. The Germans were actually outnumbered and, depending on the criteria used, out-quality-ed by the Allies in tanks but the Germans had the inestimable advantages of knowing how to use them and having the air superiority to allow them to move freely. The *Luftwaffe* had 5,446 planes, of which only 3,600 were available for the West, and only 2,600 ended up being used. The Allied strategy gave the Germans an air superiority of 2,600 against 1,800. Had the Allies used all their resources, the balance would have been in their favor. Luc De Vos comments, “at the moment of the [French] armistice, France could have engaged more planes than on May 10, but at that moment, the decisive battle had already been lost.”⁴⁷⁷

Both German and Belgian infantry companies, “the base of armies,” were composed of three platoons of four squads, but the Germans had 185 men per company, compared to the 230 of the Belgians—a lightness advantage. The Germans were also “better equipped and better armed,” with one combat truck per platoon carrying the soldiers’ personal effects, heavy weapons, and ammunition, compared to none for the

⁴⁷⁶ De Vos, p. 33; de Fabribeckers, pp. 86-87.

⁴⁷⁷ de Fabribeckers, p. 81; De Vos, pp. 33-7.

Belgians. The German *Landser*⁴⁷⁸ carried 180 rounds (half on him and half in the truck) while the Belgian soldier had 120. Both the Belgians and the Germans had twelve light machine guns per company but the German ones fired at a higher rate (900-600) and the Germans also had twelve sub-machine guns compared to one for the Belgians, three grenade launchers with 800g shells against nine Belgian ones firing 600g rounds, three anti-tank rifles, and three sniper rifles. The Belgian company also had twelve machine guns while the Germans had twelve machine guns and six 81mm mortars. Belgian active and first-reserve infantry regiments had a weapons battalion with twelve machine guns, twelve 47mm anti-tank guns, and eight 76mm mortars. The German regiments had an “anti-tank company with twelve 37mm guns and four machine guns but also an infantry cannon company with 6 pieces of 75mm and 2 of 150mm.” In divisional artillery, the Belgians were outnumbered, since their forty-eight guns (36 75mm guns and 12 105mm howitzers) could send a volley of 375-443 kilos of shot downrange while the 48 German howitzers of 105mm (36) and 150mm (12) could send an awesome 1,065 kilos. Luc De Vos argues “the level of the average German soldier was not superior to that of the French and Belgian soldier. It is the number of elite units that made the difference, notably the armored troops and parachutists.”⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁸ Infantryman; equivalent to a British “Tommy” or a French “Poilu.”

⁴⁷⁹ CDHFA, p. 88; De Vos, p. 35.

J. “The Eighteen Day Campaign”

On May 10, Belgian units were understrength by about 15% because leaves had just been reinstated after the indiscipline discussed above. Armament was also short—some weapons were not returned from a training center because the center thought it was a false alarm. Infantrymen were given only 60 rounds for their rifles while machine guns got only 840 rounds. Supply was deficient and the soldiers were not equipped for the weather. In addition, discipline and morale left something to be desired and there were communication problems between the Francophone officers and the Flemish soldiers.⁴⁸⁰

The German blows on May 10 fell on Holland, Luxembourg (which was overrun), Belgium, and French airfields. The Germans threw 26 divisions, 6 of which were armored, at the Belgians. The Belgians paid the price for their inadequate anti-aircraft defense. Although many Belgian aircraft made it to their deployment airfields, the one modern group was caught with its Hurricanes on the ground and destroyed. Later German air strikes caught the Belgian Air Force on its deployment airfields, destroying much of what remained. Fifty Belgian planes were destroyed, all but three on the ground. Belgian communications were disrupted, making concerted counter-attacks and even infantry-artillery communication impossible. German gliderborne commandos invested Fort Eben-Emael, taking it out of the fight, and forcing its surrender on May 11. Other gliderborne troops surprised the Belgian garrisons watching the bridges over the Albert Canal in the zone of the Belgian 7th Infantry Division by passing over them and coming from the rear. In addition, Belgian soldiers hesitated to shoot, being unsure whether the gliders were Allied or German. Belgians managed to destroy four of the six bridges but the two which fell intact into German hands were sufficient for their needs. Historian Luc

⁴⁸⁰ De Vos, p. 51.

De Vos comments that the German success “exceeded the German hopes: after one hour, the bridgeheads had a depth of 600 meters and a length of 1km.” The Dutch were able to partially destroy their bridges over the Meuse at Maastricht, but German pioneers ran temporary bridges over the river, allowing two German *Panzer* divisions to reach the Albert Canal.⁴⁸¹

Along the Belgian-German frontier north of the Ardennes, the Belgians by order abandoned their covering positions and the demolition was achieved despite the efforts of German commandos wearing civilian attire. Meanwhile, the German 7th *Panzerdivision*, commanded by a certain Erwin Rommel, took the 3rd Ch.A. from the south. Delays of about an hour were imposed on the Germans who then turned north and attacked Chabrehez, where two platoons of *Chasseurs ardennais* held the German advance guard for 2 ¾ hours, finally giving way at around 9pm. The official history of the Belgian Army notes: “The resistance was so strong that the enemy, believing the Belgians more numerous than they actually were, withdrew during the night.” Seven Belgian *Chasseurs* were killed.⁴⁸²

Further south in the Ardennes, the *Chasseurs ardennais* were ready and their first division successfully completed all their demolitions and delayed the German advance. A weakened Belgian company at Martelange saw the Germans in Luxembourg but held fire until the Germans crossed the Belgian frontier, at about 7:45am. Despite being threatened by German advances in the north and south, the *Chasseurs* held up the German 1st *Panzerdivision* for 2 ¾ hours and then withdrew according to orders. They were ambushed by one of the German commando units roving behind the Belgian lines and

⁴⁸¹De Vos, pp. 55-58 CDHFA, pp. 113, 146. For detailed information on the Dutch, I recommend P.L.G. Doorman’s *Military Operations in the Netherlands*, available in a new edition.

⁴⁸² CDHFA, pp. 113-4; Vangansbeke, p. 11.

suffered “severe losses.” Ironically, the action of the German commandos, by cutting off the retreat routes for the *Chasseurs*, contributed to the stubborn Belgian resistance. One company, the 5th company of the 1Ch. A., led by Commandant Bricart, held the area around Bodange and Strainchamps. Two *Chasseurs* platoons at Bodange, with one T-13, fought two German battalions—the advance guard of the 1st *Panzerdivision* and held them up until 6:15pm, losing nine dead, including Commandant Bricart. The Germans were shocked by the paucity of the Belgian *Chasseurs*, asking the surviving prisoners “where are the others?” The Germans “hurried to ‘camouflage’ the reality of the small number of effectives that were opposed to them. . . Two platoons of Ch A had stopped a division for the whole day!” Similar resistance by a reinforced platoon stopped the Germans at Strainchamps from 10am to 4pm. The German commander had to put off capturing his day one objective of Neufchâteau until the next day.⁴⁸³

At the same time, after their aid was solicited by the Belgians, French units arrived in the Ardennes and linked up with the *Chasseurs ardennais*. There was, unfortunately, confusion as, due to a misunderstanding, the French did not know of the *Chasseurs*’ orders to withdraw and thought they were being abandoned. Further north, the French First Army Group was carrying out its plan for intervention. The 7th Army on the Allied extreme left reached Breda in the Netherlands by midnight, the British Expeditionary Force reached the K-W Line and sent reconnaissance units as far as the Albert Canal. The French First Army reached its positions around the Gembloux Gap,

⁴⁸³ Vangansbeke, pp. 10-12; CDHFA, p. 116; Général Major e.r. Lucien Champion, *1940 La Guerre du Sanglier: des côtes frontaliers aux rives de la Lys* (Braine-le-Alleud, Belgium: J.M. Collet, 1977), p. 35.

pushing its Cavalry Corps (two armored divisions) forward, and the Light Cavalry Divisions of the Ninth and Second French Armies arrived in the Ardennes.⁴⁸⁴

Lord Gort, in his published dispatches, complained that the Belgians had not given the French “reliable and accurate details of the plans of the Belgian General Staff for the defence of their country in the event of an invasion by Germany.” French documents captured by the Germans and published by them give the lie to this allegation, revealing that French officers, including the military attaché in Brussels, had been allowed to reconnoiter the Belgian defenses of the K-W Line *six months* before the German invasion and that further documents had been conveyed by the Belgian chief of the General Staff and by the minister of national defense. The British even lent bulldozers to help create the K-W Line, which works were observed by a British officer in mufti. The British were informed about usable airfields and emergency landing strips in Belgium and the Belgians coordinated their transport schedules with the French plans. “It comes out in the dispatches by LORD GORT [*sic*] that the intervention of the body of the British forces into Belgium had been minutely studied.” Lord Gort himself declared that “The plans made in advance for the advance to the Dyle position actually worked to schedule in almost all respects.” Fernand Van Langenhove notes that the German breakthrough “and the penetration that had to lead to the defeat” did not come on the K-W Line (Dyle position); “it is, as LORD GORT [*sic*] and the Belgian GRAY BOOK

⁴⁸⁴ Georges Hautecler, *Rommel and Guderian against the Belgian Chasseurs ardennais: The Combats at Chabrehez and Bodange*, Trans. G.F. Nafziger (West Chester, OH: Nafziger Collection, 2003), P. 80; *Vangansbeke*, p. 10; CDHFA, p. 118.

noted, in a sector situated well below that occupied in Belgium occupied by the Belgian and British forces and those of the French First Army.”⁴⁸⁵

On the 11th, the PFL II was, on order, abandoned by its interval troops and the forts were left to fight for themselves. The *Luftwaffe* hindered Belgian movements, preventing III Corps around Liège from setting up a “northern front” to protect its left from the consequences of the shredding of I Corps on the Albert Canal. On the canal, a powerful combination of *Luftwaffe* aircraft and 4th *Panzerdivision* tanks, having passed over the improvised Maastricht bridges at 4:30 that morning, and then over the bridges seized the previous day, ripped a huge hole through the Belgian I Army Corps, destroying the 7th Infantry Division “in spite of desperate resistance, and frequent counterattacks” and throwing the 4th ID back in “very relative order.” In addition to men, the Belgians lost 40 artillery pieces out of 132 and 26 T-13s out of 38. In addition, by the end of the day, the Cavalry Corps had been ordered to abandon a “breakwater” it had formed around Cortesem and to send attached infantry divisions to the Gette river and to create a new “breakwater” around Lummen. Second Army Corps was sent from the Albert Canal to the K-W Line and the Group K and the 2e *Chasseurs ardennais* division fell back on the PFN. Meanwhile, the Allies were settling into place on the K-W Line.⁴⁸⁶

On May 12, the remaining Belgian forces on the Albert Canal withdrew, according to the Belgian American Educational Foundation (1940) “in good order,” according to a much more recent history by Luc De Vos “in a chaotic fashion in certain

⁴⁸⁵ Lord Gort quoted (in English) in Van Langenhove to Monsieur le Capitaine Ducq, October 24, 1941, pp. 1, 4-6, in SGRS-S/A “Campagne 1940” Généralités G1/A/2-b-2/7.

⁴⁸⁶ CDHFA, p. 113, 120-3; Senator Paul Kronacker, “Some Facts about the Campaign in Belgium and how the War was lost on the Continent as early at May 15,” in *The Belgian Campaign*, p. 29; Major General F.F.O. Michiels, “Summary of the Operations of the Belgian Army in May 1940”, in *The Belgian Campaign*, p. 52.

divisions,” to the K-W Line. “Panic, growing indiscipline, and the diffusion of a defeatist propaganda caused repeated problems.” The Cavalry Corps held the line of the Gette River while other Belgian forces fought “rear-guard actions on the covering and intermediate positions.” Amidst this retreat, the III AC had lost 63 of its 112 artillery pieces. Most Belgian divisions reached the K-W Line safely and joined Belgian, British, and French troops. Belgians still held the PFN and the French 9th Army was occupying the line from Namur to Sedan. In the north, the French 7th Army was pulling back from Holland. Historian Roger Keyes notes that “by resisting so staunchly [the Belgians] had by May 12 fulfilled their essential task of shielding the Allies’ advance from the assault of von Reichenau’s Sixth Army.” Also on May 12, at a conference at Casteau, King Leopold, commander-in-chief of the Belgian armed forces, agreed to accept the orders of French generalissimo Gamelin with the commander of the French First Army Group (French Seventh, First, Ninth, and Second Armies, and the BEF), General Bilotte as intermediary.⁴⁸⁷

The fourth day of the campaign saw the Germans reach the Turnhout canal, Diest, and the environs of Tirlemont although their attacks on Halen and Tirlemont were repulsed. The Cavalry Corps holding those positions were nevertheless ordered to retreat during the night. Further south, the French and the Belgian *2e Chasseurs à Cheval* were pushed in. In the sectors of the French Ninth and Second Armies, the Germans broke through and crossed the Meuse River at Houx, Monthermé, and Sedan. “By the evening of May 13, the Belgian and Allied armies had firmly taken position on the KW Line. The Belgian army was deployed with eight divisions in the first line, between Antwerp and Louvain. . . . The German units would probably have to have broken their teeth on this

⁴⁸⁷ *The Belgian Campaign*, p. 29; De Vos, p. 61; CDHFA, pp. 112-3; Keyes, p. 201.

strong position” but for the breakthrough by General von Rundstedt’s Army Group A around Houx and Sedan.⁴⁸⁸

The Dutch capitulated on the Fourteenth, but aside from that, things were relatively quiet. A German attack on Louvain, after initial success, was thrown back by a British counter-attack supported by Belgian troops (who ceded Louvain to the British sector).⁴⁸⁹

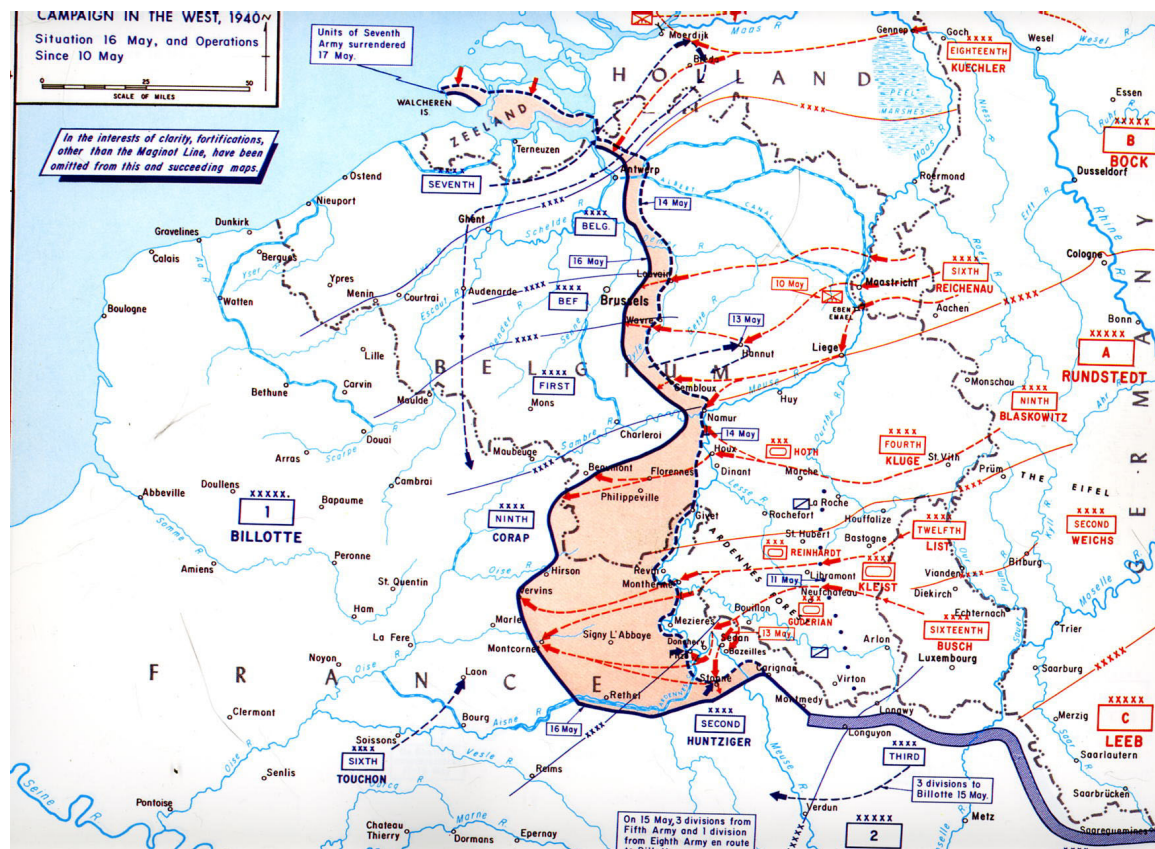
On the Fifteenth, another German attack on Louvain was repulsed by British troops while the remains of Belgian aviation lent what help they could. A two-day artillery duel broke out with the Belgian guns of 15 groups firing at a rate of six per minute “to give the Germans the impression of the arrival of reinforcements.” The Belgians were also using their long-range railroad guns. “The powerful artillery barrages restored courage in the Belgian soldiers; for the first time it seemed to them that they were on the stronger side.” North of Namur, the French First Army was forced back and the German race to the coast had begun in the sectors of the French Ninth and Second Armies.⁴⁹⁰

The morning of the Sixteenth saw the Belgian troops safely, securely, and “confidently” on their positions on the K-W Line “flanked by the Allied armies and protected by excellent artillery formations” and prepared to repulse anything the Germans sent at them. Unfortunately, the order they received was to evacuate the K-W Line and fall back to the west. “This order came like a burst of thunder in a clear sky. Didn’t leaving the K-W Line mean surrendering Brussels and Antwerp without a fight?” Thus began a morale-killing and exhausting series of night retreats and day battles for the

⁴⁸⁸ CDHFA, pp.123-5; De Vos, p. 70.

⁴⁸⁹ CDHFA, p. 125; De Vos, pp. 77-78.

⁴⁹⁰ De Vos, p. 78; *The Belgian Campaign*, pp. 29-30.



Map 6: "Situation May 16, 1940." Thomas E. Greiss, series editor, *West Point Atlas for the Second World War: Europe and the Mediterranean*, The West Point Military History Series (Garden City Park, NY: Square One, 2002), Map 11.

Belgians and the rest of the First Army Group. However, it offered the only chance for the Allies of staying out of the trap being sprung by the German Army Group A streaming through the gap at Sedan. The Allies also had to cope with another threat: Since the Dutch capitulation of May 14, an entire German army with air support was freed to fall on the Allied northern flank, seize the mouth of the Scheldt, and attack Antwerp. A German attack on the Line around Wygmael was repulsed by the second company of the first battalion of the *4e Chasseurs*.⁴⁹¹

The Belgian cabinet met at the HQ in Breendonk and “observed that the leaders of the army and the king considered the war on the continent as lost.” Also at Breendonk, the general staff was working out the plans for a retreat to the Scheldt-TPG-Terneuzen canal line, which would be reached by May 19 after stops and combat on the Willebroek Canal, and the junctions of the Dendre and lower Scheldt rivers. The reserve divisions and artillery would leave the line first, followed that night by the four divisions on the southern part of the K-W Line. This “unrolled without too many problems.” The next night, the four northern divisions fell back. This maneuver was more difficult because they were in contact with the Germans. The German pursuit was thwarted by “a strong Belgian rear guard composed of units of motorized cavalry and of the *Chasseurs ardennais* of General Keyaerts. Thus two of the major army improvement projects of the 1932-1940 period--the creation of the elite *Chasseurs ardennais* and the motorization of the cavalry--proved their worth on the battlefield. Meanwhile, the British who fought so valiantly at Louvain had to abandon Brussels and the French First Army was ordered to

⁴⁹¹ De Vos, pp. 78-80; CDHFA, p. 127.

retreat to France. Luckily for the Allies, German aviation was quiet; the Allies had enough problems moving through huge crowds of terrified refugees.⁴⁹²

On the 18th, a reinforced squadron (cavalry battalion) of the Second Lancers attacked a German bridgehead across the Willebroek Canal in order to cover the withdrawal of the rest of the Belgian forces while a battalion of the *2e Chasseurs* was outflanked and nearly destroyed by the German forces. That night, the French First Army reached French soil.⁴⁹³

On May 19, Generalissimo Gamelin was replaced by the even older General Weygand, throwing all the Allied plans into disarray and delaying a necessary counterattack planned by Gamelin. In Belgium, the First *Chasseurs ardennais* Division on the Dendre river was attacked at 11am, held until 12:30pm, withdrew seven km, was attacked again at 6pm, held again until 8pm, then withdrew again to the eastern suburbs of Wetteren. “At 23 hours [11pm], after a day of exemplary delaying battles, it retired behind the TPG.” The Cavalry Corps was also hit and some units lost ground but the CC withdrew according to orders towards the Terneuzen Canal. The rest of the army achieved its objectives of “the Ghent-Terneuzen Canal, the TPG, and on the Scheldt upriver from the TPG up to the northern outskirts of Audenarde.” The BEF also left the Dendre but kept the 12th Lancers as its rear guard.⁴⁹⁴

By the 20th, the Belgian and Allied forces were in the positions cited above. They had lost a lot of their equipment; their depots, including those for the K-W Line, had not been evacuated in time. Brussels and Antwerp had fallen, and only Bruges and Ghent were still free of the major Belgian cities. Twelve Belgian divisions held seventy

⁴⁹² De Vos, p. 80; CDHFA, pp. 127-128

⁴⁹³ CDHFA, pp. 128-9.

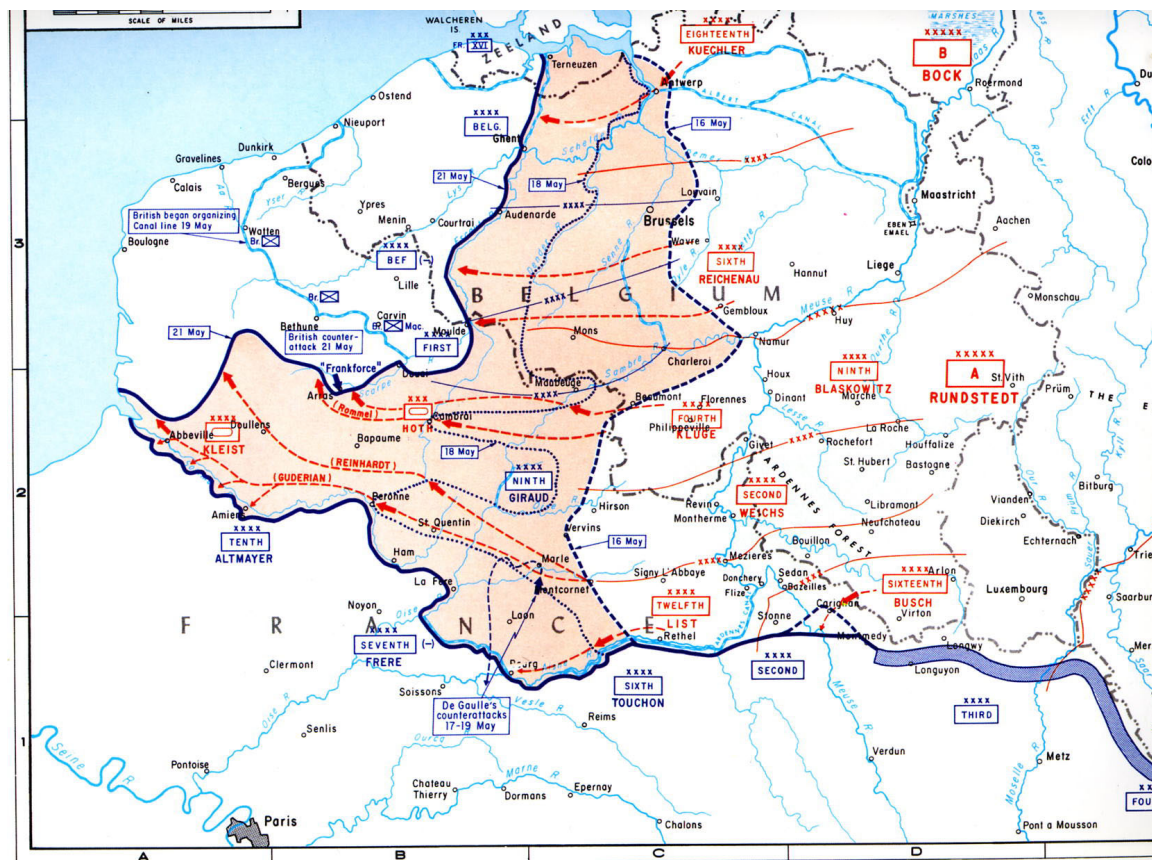
⁴⁹⁴ CDHFA, pp. 129-30

kilometers of front between Terneuzen and Audenarde. To their north was a corps from the French Seventh Army and to their south was the BEF. Belgian troops of the 10th ID repulsed German attacks across the scheldt and where the Germans did succeed, they were held by a counterattack. At the TPG, the Germans secured small gains despite a Belgian counterattack that recovered some, but not all, of the lost positions. The Germans ran into “a Belgian and British resistance as fierce as unexpected.” The Belgian forces were exhausted after days of fighting and nights of marching. Nevertheless, they also stopped the German attempts to cross the canal on May 21 with heavy losses. The Belgian General Staff had been forced to relocate to St. André-lez-Bruges.⁴⁹⁵

On May 21, the Germans reached the French coast at Abbéville, cutting off the Allied troops in Belgium. The Allied commanders were supposed to meet at Ypres in Belgium. Generalissimo Weygand came to discuss his plans with General Bilotte (First French Army Group), Lord Gort, and King Leopold (as Belgian commander-in-chief). Because of travel complications, the conference unfolded in several independent talks with whoever happened to have arrived. The Belgians agreed to extend their front to take over part of the BEF’s northern/north-eastern front, freeing the latter for an attack south. The Belgians also acceded to Generalissimo Weygand’s request for a withdrawal to the Yser River—the site of Belgium’s miraculous stand in 1914. Unfortunately for the Allies, General Bilotte was mortally injured in an automobile accident on his way back from the conference and died without telling anybody what had been resolved at Ypres. He was only replaced on May 25 by General Blanchard, formerly commander of the French First Army.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹⁵ De Vos, pp. 80-1; CDHFA, p. 131.

⁴⁹⁶ CDHFA, p. 132, Michiels, p. 54.



Map 7: "Situation 21 May and Operations Since 16 May," *West Point Atlas*, map 12.

On May 22, the Belgians, as agreed, extended their line to 90km (56 miles). However, instead of retreating to the Yser, which would have given the Belgians a 53km front “protected in great part by a waterway or flooding,” the Belgians decided to retreat only to the Lys River and the Derivation Canal. General Michiels writes that “the picture would be incomplete if we failed to mention complications resulting from a multitude of columns of evacuees of every description closing in on the French frontier which was more often closed than open.” Not much happened on the Belgian front on this day.⁴⁹⁷

The Germans attacked again the next day, but ran into “a determined Belgian resistance,” despite which, Ghent was accidentally given to the Germans with between 8,000 and 9,500 prisoners. That afternoon, the General Staff sent out orders for a withdrawal behind the Derivation Canal of the Lys, which would form, with the Lys, the last stand line of the Belgian Army. Luc De Vos argues “[a]fter fourteen days of war, there was no longer any question of fighting in retreat. The greatest part of the country was occupied and the King had always refused to deploy his principal force outside of national territory. . . . Despite appalling problems, the morale was relatively good in many units.” One of the problems was that the terrain favored the attacker.⁴⁹⁸

In the early morning of May 24, two German armies, numbering twelve divisions attacked the Belgians around Courtrai over the Lys. The main effort was with six divisions against two Belgian ones. After a massive air and artillery bombardment penetrations were made both north and south of the city. The Belgians resisted valiantly and executed several counterattacks but the Germans still held bridgeheads across the Lys at sundown. This was also the day when Hitler issued his famous “stop order” preventing

⁴⁹⁷ CDHFA, pp. 132-3; Michiels, pp. 54-55.

⁴⁹⁸ De Vos, p. 87; CDHFA, p. 134.

the Germans from wiping out the Allied forces that would end up being evacuated from Dunkirk.⁴⁹⁹

On the 25th, the Belgians forced the Germans back across the Derivation Canal and the *Chasseurs ardennais* stopped the Germans at Vinckt. After the *Chasseurs ardennais* withdrew from that place, the Germans vented their frustration by murdering 86 Belgian civilians. Similar massacres took place in other locales as well. In other places, Belgians were surrendering “with enthusiasm.” In addition, Germans were using civilians and Belgian POWs as human shields, discouraging the Belgians from opening fire. At Meigem, the Belgian 4th ID essentially ceased to exist, allowing the Germans across the canal. The King, “knowing that a battle of exhaustion was approaching,” gave an order of the day to his troops, promising to share their fate. At the King’s headquarters in Wijnendaele, the King split from four of his ministers (Prime Minister Pierlot, Foreign Minister Spaak, Minister of National Defense Denis, and Minister for Colonies Vanderpoorten) who urged him to flee into exile and continue the fight from France. These four ministers went on to form the Belgian Government in Exile.⁵⁰⁰

The next day, fresh German units threatened to split the Belgians and British but two Belgian divisions (one cavalry, one infantry) blocked the attack and with another infantry division, held the line. Unfortunately, in other places, “the line wavered.” The French had been unable to send as many divisions as they had promised and the Belgians could no longer count on the British, who were looking to get back to Britain. “The German pressure on the Belgian front became so strong that the British support would only have delayed the inevitable.” The planning for what became known as the “Miracle

⁴⁹⁹ De Vos, pp. 81-2; CDHFA, pp. 135-7.

⁵⁰⁰ De Vos, pp. 88-9; CDHFA 137-8.

of Dunkirk,” the evacuation of 338,000 Allied troops to Britain, contained no provisions for the Belgians. The last Belgian reserves were thrown into the battle. General Michiels notes that “there remained no hope of any direct English or French cooperation although the Allies were advised that we had no more fresh troops and that the limit of resistance was rapidly approaching.” That is important because after the Belgians surrendered, the Allies accused the Belgians of not warning them. In fact, as Walter Lord points out, “[a]lthough the Belgians, since May 25, had repeatedly warned the British and French they were nearing the end of their ability to resist, Leopold, on the other hand, had been told nothing about Allied intentions.”⁵⁰¹

On May 27, the Belgian front was cracking in numerous places and there were no more troops available to plug the gaps. There was a 4.5 mile gap through which the Germans could have reached Bruges, the last major city in Belgian hands. General Michiels recalls, “Our troops were holding steadily on every front, fighting in position and giving ground only foot by foot, inflicting heavy losses on the assailant. The artillery were emptying their caissons, firing point blank and were blowing up their pieces when they were going to fall into the hands of the enemy.” The *Carabiniers Cyclists* even managed to take 200 German prisoners at Knesselaere. However, the Belgians had reached their limit. Their hospitals were full and their caissons were empty. There were thousands of refugees concentrated into a small area vulnerable to disease as well as German artillery and aircraft. There was no expectation of Allied aid. “The day of the 28th could not have possibly have modified these conditions. Any retreat was impossible because of the extended line of our units, the absence of any reserves, the state of fatigue

⁵⁰¹ Michiels, pp. 55-6; De Vos, p. 88; Walter Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk* (London: Allen Lane, 1982), pp. 78,101.

of our troops and the absolute mastery of the air by the enemy. Any new battle would have resulted immediately in the dislocation of the last organized units and the loss of thousands of human lives.”⁵⁰²

On the morning of May 27, Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, the British emissary to King Leopold, telephoned Winston Churchill, by then Prime Minister, and warned him that the Belgian resistance “had reached its end.” He conveyed a similar warning to Lord Gort while Colonel Davy of the British mission warned Gort’s chief of staff that Belgium would surrender within 24 hours. Around 3pm, General van Overstraeten warned the French chief of mission, General Champon, that “we have arrived at the extreme limit of resistance. Our front is frittering away, like a cord which breaks after complete use.” Between 3:30pm and 4pm, Leopold decided to send an emissary to find out the German terms and warned the Allied missions. Two French divisions were transported in Belgian trucks towards Dunkirk and relative safety. The Belgian Army’s flags and standards were placed in safe-keeping or hidden. At 5pm, Leopold sent General Derausseau, the second in command of the General Staff, who was led to the headquarters of General von Reichenau, commander of the German Sixth Army. At 8pm, orders for one last retreat left Belgian headquarters. Around 11pm, Derausseau returned. There were no terms; Hitler demanded unconditional surrender. Leopold accepted, with the surrender to take effect at 4am on May 28. However, the fort of Tancremont-Pepinster continued the fight until around 3pm on May 29 while Belgian forces in France were still “provisionally” in the Allied camp.⁵⁰³

⁵⁰² Michiels, pp. 56-7; De Vos, p. 89; CDHFA, pp. 143-5.

⁵⁰³ Leopold III, p. 51; CDHFA, p. 145; De Vos, p. 89-90.

After the surrender, the French and the Belgian government in exile hit the roof. French Prime Minister Reynaud announced on the radio to the French people “a grave event. This event occurred last night. France can no longer count on the Belgian Army. . . [sic] King Leopold III without a word to the French and British soldiers. . . [sic] laid down his arms. It is a fact without precedent in history.” Reynaud went so far as to warn Foreign Minister Spaak that if the Belgian Government did not immediately disown King Leopold, Reynaud would not look after the Belgian refugees in France. The Belgian Government in exile acceded to Reynaud’s demand. Churchill, for his part told the House of Commons that “I have no intention of suggesting to the House that we should attempt at this moment to pass judgment upon the King of the Belgians in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief of the Belgian Army. That army has fought very bravely and has both suffered and inflicted heavy losses.” He would shortly, however, join in the denunciations of the Belgian capitulation. Belgium lost 12,033 killed, “of whom a little more than half were civilians.” 250,000 Belgian soldiers ended up as prisoners of war.⁵⁰⁴

Belgium’s policy of “independence” did not keep the country out of war. However, the same policy was credited, in Belgium and abroad, with being a wise policy and with keeping Belgium out of the turmoil of the Sudeten Crisis and, without the benefit of hindsight, the Belgians had every right to hope for a similar result after the breakout of World War II. The overarching goal of the Belgian leaders was to keep the country out of war. “Independence” offered them that chance while inviting the Allies in preemptively would have been the negation of all their plans and hopes. If Belgium could not keep out of war, “Independence” was the only policy that could have united all parts

⁵⁰⁴ De Vos, p. 89; Paul Reynaud, quoted in Herbert Hoover, “The Surrender of the Belgian Army,” in *The Belgian Campaign*, p. 7; Dumoulin, p. 176; Winston Churchill, quoted in Hoover, p. 7; De Vos, p. 89.

of society and gotten their support for the expansion and improvement of the Belgian Army.

How did Belgian defense policy fare against reality? Belgium kept out of the war until May 10, 1940, over eight months after the conflict broke out. Belgium had done nothing to bring the invasion on. Its leaders could have an easy conscience on that score. The Belgians assumed a German invasion and planned how to meet one. The Germans did, in fact, invade and the Belgians eventually found themselves in a strong defensive position supported by the Allies they expected. Again, Belgian policy worked. The fatal breach was not made through Belgian units. Elite Belgian units played praiseworthy roles in the defense of their country. Under pressure from politicians, among others, the Belgians had set about creating an army skilled in defense (although unfortunately deprived of “offensive” weapons). That army showed its worth in the battles after the evacuation of the K-W Line. It fought bravely in the face of increasingly long odds. The goals of defense policy were met there as well.

It is not appropriate to judge a plan or a policy solely on hindsight. Just because a policy did not work out, that plan was not *a priori* “stupid.” The evaluation must also consider whether the plan was based on reasonable premises, accorded with reality, and had the interests of the planners at heart. Yes, the Belgian military policies from 1932 to 1940 did not keep Belgium from being occupied, much less, kept out of the war. But the goal of keeping the country out of war was an eminently reasonable one and the Belgians framed policies, first tied to France and then “independent,” that had gave them the only chance to do so. In fact, the policy of neutrality kept Belgium out of the Sudeten Crisis and won praise from all sides for doing so. Since May 1940 the Belgians have been

castigated for not allying with the Franco-British and for not allowing Allied troops into Belgium before a German invasion. To do so would have been to commit national suicide, changing a possible German invasion to a definite one. It is hard to justify suicide by the “national interest.” Belgian policymakers from 1932 gave their best energies to formulating a scheme to protect their country. The failure of that policy in the face of an evil that overturned the plans of much stronger nations should not obliterate the efforts of those policymakers and their subordinates who carried them out!

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