

**WAR
OCCUPATION
LIBERATION**

WAR *Belgium*
1940–1945
OCCUPATION
LIBERATION

Wannes Devos
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PREFACE

Michel Jaupart

The German army's crossing of the Belgian border on 10 May 1940 signalled an end to the "Phoney War" which began in September 1939 after the invasion of Poland. Everything has already been said about this war, and mostly in lofty terms. A world war, which involved not only nearly all the independent states across the globe but also the Western world's own colonial territories. A war that claimed an unprecedented number of victims – between 50 and 60 million deaths – and ultimately cost more civilian than military lives. Finally, a war that culminated in the deployment of nuclear weapons and humanity's entry into a new era, where its demise is guaranteed should these weapons of mass destruction ever be used.

However, even if this planetary conflict involved, by analogy, the same warring factions as in the First World War and is increasingly regarded by historians as the second chapter of a war that began in 1914 and ended in 1945, it nevertheless has a number of features of interest that endow the conflict with a genuine quality of uniqueness.

First of all, whereas the 1914-1918 war was a fairly conventional conflict whose main purpose was obscure territorial and economic rivalries between a series of nations, which the writer Éric Vuillard summarised in *La bataille d'Occident* with the notion of a "quarrel between cousins", the Second World War's main distinction was primarily its ideological dimension, notwithstanding its obvious territorial and economic aspects.

This monumental clash between three different visions of the world and society involved: a right-wing inegalitarian and racist system of totalitarianism dominated by Nazi Germany and most of its allies, a left-wing system of totalitarianism that was officially egalitarian but was also a source of multiple discriminations against national minorities in the Soviet Union and certain social classes, and, finally, the equally hegemonic democracies trying to survive in a world divided between these two totalitarian visions.

A priest gives the final blessing on the edge of a temporary mass grave, dug in the courtyard of the Stavelot Abbey, January 1945. The grave contains the corpses of Belgian men, women and children who were killed by the German SS in December 1944 during the Battle of the Bulge in the Stavelot area.

(War Heritage Institute, Brussels, D.1.26.53)



View from the top of the *Rathausturm* in the south of Dresden, February 1945. On the night of 13-14 February 1945, an estimated 25,000 people were killed and 30,000 injured during the Allied carpet bombing of the city. Until today, there has been controversy about this kind of bombing: is this “normal” warfare or a war crime? (War Heritage Institute, Brussels, D.2.47.2 – Saxon State Library)

The conflict was further defined in terms of an extreme form of “brutalisation”. War is inherently violent but the Second World War went beyond all limits. Executions of prisoners of war, destruction of towns, cities and villages, assassinations of civilians accentuated the conflict in a kind of litany of horror. Several million Soviet prisoners of war died in German camps and while the destruction of Houffalize, Bande, Lidice or Oradour-sur-Glane, in particular, lives on in all our memories, we must not forget the night on 80,000 towns and villages destroyed in a similar way in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. This shameful list also has to include the millions of women who were raped and often murdered and – we must be honest enough to acknowledge this – the systematic bombing campaigns against civilian populations and cultural property carried out by both the Axis forces and the Allies.

Finally, it was a racist war of extermination, in which few warring factions shied away from the worst atrocities, not only against enemy troops but also against civilian populations, as they were seen as “racially” inferior and too often demonised in the process. The widespread, systematic, scientifically organised and industrialised mass extermination of some six million Jews and Sinti and Roma in Europe is the most horrendous and well-known example, but there are others that should not be forgotten. Nazi Germany

had planned the death of Soviet citizens in the areas it occupied and fifteen million Soviet civilians lost their lives during the conflict, not only starving to death but also dying from *Wehrmacht* and SS bullets. The same was true in China, where the Japanese Imperial Army massacred what the troops regarded as inferior Chinese people, particularly in Shanghai and Nanjing.

Complementary to the new permanent Second World War-themed exhibition, the work you are about to discover highlights the Belgian dimension of this monumental conflict. The War Heritage Institute's exhibition is on show at the Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History. The work covers the interwar period to the liberation, including a review of the Battle of Belgium (or the Belgian Campaign, often referred to within Belgium as the 18 Days' Campaign) and the different attitudes adopted by the authorities and the people of Belgium during the occupation. The authors tell the story of Belgium during this turbulent period, a story that also relates to our grandparents, our parents and, by the same token, ourselves.

These authors are ranked among the leading Belgian and foreign experts on the themes dealt with. I would like to thank them for their excellent work and hope that this book will soon become regarded as a valued source of reference on the subject.

I hope you will enjoy reading this book and it will encourage you to learn more about the history of Belgium during the Second World War and discover the thousands of objects and documents that the War Heritage Institute is exhibiting at the Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History, the National Memorial Fort Breen-donk and Bastogne Barracks.

1

**FROM
ONE WAR TO
THE OTHER**



TWENTY YEARS OF PEACE? BELGIAN INTERWAR POLICY

Catherine Lanneau

On the eve of the 1918 Armistice, King Albert was awarded the highest Japanese honorary distinction, the Supreme Order of the Chrysanthemum. The jewel and its necklace were delivered to him by an embassy extraordinary led by Admiral and Imperial Prince Yorihiro Higashifushimi (the youngest branch of the imperial family) at the Castle in Lophem. This place, the temporary headquarters of the general staff, was also the site of crucial talks held from 11 to 14 November 1918 between the monarch, advised by Émile Francqui, and a series of eminent, often progressive figures, on the priorities for post-war Belgium. To the dismay of the conservative “old right”, which would speak of a “Lophem coup” and suggest that the revolutionary threat had been overestimated in order to force the King’s hand, the parties reached an agreement on universal suffrage, a consolidation of linguistic equality and a more sensitive response to social concerns.

Until the autumn of 1921, the Belgian government maintained the three-party national unity (Catholic, Liberal, Socialist) that had resulted from the conflict, but the election in November 1919 of the first post-war legislative chambers by universal, essentially male, suffrage – in a breach of the Constitution – upset the political balance of power: now Catholics and Socialists were standing shoulder-to-shoulder, while the Liberals became a third minority party whose main leaders remained committed to the defence of the “French Belgium” approach dating back to 1830.

They became the essential complement to the bipartite coalitions. The balance of the scales within the Catholic camp was increasingly tilting towards the Christian Democratic and Flemish left wing.

Collar and jewel of the Supreme Order of the Chrysanthemum, awarded to King Albert by Japan, 1918. After the First World War, the “Knight-King” receives many decorations from around the world. The sovereign’s prestige is also reflected in Belgian politics. However, during the interwar period, the image of the King is not enough to resolve all socio-economic problems.

(War Heritage Institute, Brussels, 805300-805301)

Implications of the Great War

The major political and social changes in the aftermath of the war reflected a form of consensus or mutual concessions between two political pillars. The abolition of Article 310 of the Criminal Code, which imposed severe penalties in the case of any obstacle to the freedom to work, satisfied first and foremost the Belgian Workers' Party, while the law on non-profit associations, granting them legal personality, mainly served the interests of Catholic circles. The major tax reform programme ushered in a graduated income tax to ensure greater fairness, thus overturning a system heavily reliant on property and indirect taxes. Against the background of a Belgium in need of reconstruction, and a precarious economic and industrial situation, certain social policies helped to ease the tensions, such as aligning wages with the cost of living and creating a National Crisis Fund for channelling unemployment benefits through the trade unions for a limited period of time. Adopted at the instigation of the International Labour Organisation, the eight-hour working day became the accepted norm, but many opportunities for exemptions were allowed to enable businesses to remain competitive. The time freed up by the shorter working day could be used for leisure or continuing education, themes which each pillar espoused but according to a somewhat paternalist approach. Public health and hygiene also received attention, with the creation of the *Œuvre nationale de l'enfance* (National Childhood Organisation) and the highly controversial Vandervelde Law on the partial prohibition of alcoholic beverages.

On the diplomatic front, Belgium, which was then overwhelmed by an unprecedented wave of national pride, was deeply disappointed at Versailles: the text of the treaty apparently failed to respect its status as an innocent victim and its involvement in the conflict. It certainly restored the country in its entirety, cut it loose from its imposed neutrality but offered the nation only a small territorial extension (Eupen, Malmedy, Saint-Vith, Moresnet) and a mandate from the League of Nations on Ruanda-Urundi. Relieved of its war debts to the Allies, it was awarded an initial payment of \$2.5 billion as the first instalment of the German war reparations, which was far from what was hoped for. As for its claims against Luxembourg and the Netherlands, spurred on by the nationalist lobby (National Policy Committee), these remained bound by subsequent bilateral negotiations. Brussels failed to obtain anything from The Hague. The Belgian-Luxembourg Economic Union was conditional upon French withdrawal. Belgium paid for it with a bilateral defensive military agreement (1920). The confidential clauses and mere existence of the agreement directed against Germany fuelled several debates with "community" or pacifist overtones. Was Belgium tagging along behind France? Is this the way the joint occupation of the Ruhr (1923-1925), in retaliation for the woeful payment of war reparations, should be interpreted? In 1925, the Locarno Treaties, the highpoint of collective security, seemed to take the tensions out of the de-

bate for a while. Under the Rhine Pact, France, Belgium and Germany recognised and protected their common borders, also under the guarantee of Great Britain and Italy. The Franco-Belgian military agreement apparently lapsed into semi-oblivion.

Belgium was then led by an unprecedented coalition of Socialists, headed by Emile Vandervelde, and Catholics, mostly Flemish and Christian Democrats, under the leadership of Prime Minister Prosper Poullet. Between the autumn of 1921 and the spring of 1925, successive Catholic-Liberal teams took advantage of the renewed economic growth to initiate a policy of major works, but the outcome of the 1925 election was good for the Socialists and very negative for the Liberals. Anxious to curb the period of service and military expenditure, the new cabinet ended up clashing with the army and most war veterans. Affected by monetary instability in the wake of the conflict, its economic and social policy was viewed with mistrust by those in the industrial and financial sectors. A tripartite national unity cabinet was set up in 1926 to contend with rising inflation. Headed by the Catholic Henri Jaspar, its strong man was Émile Francqui, the King's confidant and Vice-Governor of the *Société Générale*. Thanks to its special powers, the government managed to stabilise the franc at one-seventh of its pre-war value, ushering in a brief period of economic and commercial prosperity. This resulted not only in the launch of major projects, such as the Albert Canal programme, a growing Flemish economy, underpinned in particular by the port of Antwerp and the new Campine coal mines, but also the trend towards concentration in the industrial and banking sectors. In the case of social welfare, compulsory old-age insurance was introduced in 1924, while family allowances were paid to all employees from 1930 onwards. It therefore seemed to be a time for optimism but Belgium's 1930 Centenary exhibition, which was held in Liège and Antwerp, would later be interpreted as a swan song.

One of Lophem's priorities was undoubtedly met with less satisfaction, as it was so simple for his opponents to put all the Flemish eggs in the same activist basket: the Dutchification of Ghent University. Playing on the memory of the precedent set by the war – the so-called von Bissing University, established by the occupying forces – the champions of "French Ghent", including the Walloon militants, divided since 1923 between Walloon Assembly "unionists" and Walloon Action League "federalists", sought to delay the timeline they saw as detrimental to the country's unity and scientific prestige. The university underwent a partial Dutchification process under the 1923 Nolf Law. No-one was pleased at this outcome and it was not until 1930 that Dutch became the only teaching language.

Meanwhile, other issues that were polarising the debates, such as an amnesty for Flemish activists of the First World War, temporarily resulted in a compromise, known as the Expiry Law: sentences were not waived but regarded as lapsed for all convicts, including the most famous of them all, August Borms. Operating from his prison cell he managed to win a 1928 by-election in Antwerp that was highly symbolic for the rise



A mass of people at the foot of the Yser Tower under construction, 18 August 1929. During the tenth Yser Pilgrimage, an international tribute is held in the context of “No more war”. With the rise of the VNV in the 1930s, however, the pacifist course is increasingly giving way to a radical Flemish nationalism with an anti-Belgian tone. (Archives Joris Lannoo, Tielst)

of Flemish nationalism. During the 1929 general election, the number of Flemish nationalists’ seats increased from five to eleven. From then on, a majority began to emerge in both the north and the south to consolidate and amplify an approach based on regional unilingualism, as already introduced pursuant to the 1921 Van Cauwelaert Law on the use of languages in administrative matters.

Various laws were passed during the 1930s applicable to administration and education (1932), justice (1935) and the army (1938). The latter created unilingual units up to battalion level but, in practice, linguistic uniformity soon extended to regimental level. Although the linguistic border was not fixed and the Frenchification process was continuing in the Brussels conurbation and its periphery, the approach based on a Dutch-speaking Flanders, a French-speaking Wallonia and a bilingual area in the capital was firmly rooted in what was happening in practice. The 1937 amnesty law for activists was finally passed, provoking a backlash from war veterans and an internal crisis in the Liberal Party.

The country’s dual cultural character was officially acknowledged by the duplication of Belgian Academies and the creation of two cultural advisory councils. The appoint-

ment, in early 1939, of a former amnesty activist, Dr Adriaan Martens, to the (Flemish) Royal Academy of Medicine, sparked off a government crisis – with the Liberals leaving the cabinet – the dissolution of the Chambers and early elections that strengthened the Liberal Party. The Catholic-Liberal coalition could not be re-established until Martens resigned. These various episodes underscored the growing importance of the “community” issue, which was also reflected in the parliamentary proposals, which were disregarded, for a federalist reform of the state (Herman Vos from the *Frontpartij* – Front Party – on the Flemish side, in 1931, and three Socialists, including the Liège-based Georges Truffaut, in 1938, on the Walloon side).

Belgium in crisis

Now back to the economic and social situation. The international stock market crash and its crisis in 1929 made a real impact on Belgium from the latter half of 1931 onwards. The crisis intensified in 1932. The Young Plan saw to it that the programme of German war reparations was dead and buried, the pound plummeted in value, putting pressure on the National Bank of Belgium, capital owners sought to organise their flight and the level of debt started to rise.

The recession affected all sectors of the economy: both industrial output and exports dropped by about one-fifth. Complete unemployment or short-time working was becoming a problem of enormous proportions, while regions such as the Borinage were experiencing real pain and suffering. In response to the crisis, successive governments, coalitions of Liberals and Catholics, used special powers to conduct a deflationary policy that curbed public spending, reduced unemployment benefits and pensions and increased the tax burden. All of this led to social tension. In 1932, a huge wave of strikes began in the mining regions, starting in Hainaut. But the crisis also had an impact on the banking sector: victims of reckless management, some banks, sometimes linked to the political pillars, went bankrupt. The authorities responded by putting an end to mixed banks, requiring activities to be split up between deposit and investment banks (holding companies), and creating a “watchdog” for the sector, the Banking Commission.

In the course of time, people started calling for another response to the economic crisis, along the lines of President Roosevelt’s New Deal in the United States. The Vice-Governor of the National Bank, Paul van Zeeland, who had close links with the Catholic Party, called for devaluation, while the economist Henri De Man from the Belgian Workers’ Party introduced his Labour Plan in late 1933, based on the advent of a mixed and planned economy, bringing together the private sector and a broad nationalised sector (credit, transport, energy and raw materials industries). A final deflationary experiment was conducted by Theunis IV – known as the “bankers’ government”

THE IMPLICATIONS OF CONTROLLING THE RHINE

Anne Godfroid

Under the terms of the Armistice Agreement, tens of thousands of Allied and auxiliary troops, including some 46,000 Belgians,² were stationed on the left bank of the Rhine from Cleves to Landau, and at the bridgeheads of Cologne, Koblenz and Mainz on the right bank, starting from December 1918. The occupied territories were partitioned into four zones running respectively from north to south and placed under the control of Belgian, British, American and French troops respectively.

The troops were tasked with making the occupied territories secure and restricting access to the area, whether by land or water, pending the return of peace. The Limburg gap along the German-Dutch border was closed off with a barbed wire fence and guarded by Belgian troops. Obviously being the key route for the entry of any subversive civil or military agents, the Rhine had to be tightly sealed. Geostrategic and economic issues could also be found behind the river control policy. The *Commission interalliée de navigation de campagne* (CINC – Inter-Allied Field Navigation Commission) and the Rhine Fleet were part of this control system, which included Belgian military personnel.

This acronym CINC was used to describe one of the many logistics bodies created in the aftermath of the Armistice to enforce its conditions. The CINC was responsible for overseeing river navigation and transshipment activities. Presented in 1921 by Lieuten-

Flag of the *Commission interalliée de navigation de campagne* (Inter-Allied Field Navigation Commission), Belgian flotilla on the Rhine, Cologne, 1918-1923.

(War Heritage Institute, Brussels, 801027)



ant Colonel Constant Dumont, then Head of the Cologne-based Belgian Mission to the CINC, this pennant graced the mast of one of the twenty Belgian ships that were part of the Rhine Flotilla. This small fleet was set up in December 1918 and placed under the command of Lieutenant Commander François Darlan, the future admiral and head of the French Navy in 1940. Flying the CINC flag, and patrolling the river in the Belgian sector, for a distance of nearly 140 km, these vessels were responsible for boarding boats and controlling their cargo. The CINC control commissions inspected river traffic at the main right bank transshipment points. Isolated in a hostile environment and stationed in Emmerich, Wesel, Alsum, Walsum, Duisburg-Ruhrort and Düsseldorf, small Belgian detachments were assigned a variety of tasks including frequent contacts with Germans residing in the unoccupied area, as underscored by the story told by this soldier using a somewhat colourful form of language: “We are beyond the Rhine, in the land of the Spartacists! And you might start to think they had hair on their teeth. It is not at all the same kind of civilian you see on the river’s left bank.”³ Unaffected by the measures violating the fundamental freedoms of the left bank, people living in the unoccupied territories presumably adopted a swaggering attitude that tended to irk the soldiers, some of whom were trigger-happy to start with. When things turned ugly as they often did, this was soon reported in the German press that was freely available on the right bank.

For example, this was the area, between Walsum and Ruhrort, in Hamborn, where Lieutenant José Graff was murdered in March 1922. The impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators to act and flee was also due to the convoluted status of the region, with its adjacent occupied and unoccupied areas. Belgian public opinion, and war veterans in particular, were deeply shocked by this case, calling for harsh penalties and guarantees for the safety of the Belgian occupying troops deployed in the Rhineland. This incident was a reflection of the relations between the occupying and occupied communities, which had gradually begun to deteriorate ever since the spring of 1921, and the occupation of the inland waterway ports of Duisburg-Ruhrort and Düsseldorf. The slow process of cultural demobilisation was put on hold.

Relations between the occupiers and the occupied were increasingly marred by violence, which reached its peak in 1923 during the Franco-Belgian operation in the Ruhr region, which resulted in a negative situation marked on the German side by acts of civil and armed resistance – including the deadly attack on the Belgian leave train in Hochfeld – and on the Belgian side by a state of siege and mass expulsions. It was only ten years after the declaration of war in August 1914 that relations between the former warring sides finally began to normalise so that they were able to live together peacefully on the Rhine. In 1930, the Belgian-French forces were the last to leave the Rhineland areas, five years ahead of the deadlines set in the Treaty of Versailles.

MULTILATERALISM OR ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY? THE BELGIAN MISSION(S) IN ETHIOPIA

Manuel Duran

The Treaty of Versailles marked the end of the mandatory neutrality of our country. The guarantees that supported said neutrality could not prevent one of the guarantors from invading our country in 1914. Diplomatically, Belgium stood on its own from now on. After a short period in which the French card was mostly drawn, our country, after the Locarno Treaties, focused on multilateralism, diplomatic diversification and reinforcement of its commercial interests through gradually more intensive economic diplomacy.

Headgear of an Ethiopian commander, offered to Belgian Major Ernest Polet by the Imperial Guard of the negus (emperor), ca. 1935.

(War Heritage Institute, Brussels, 506762)





Indigenous fighters in traditional costume during the Italian conquest, Ethiopia, 1936. The battle in Ethiopia is fought with unequal weapons. Fascist Italy even uses chemical mustard gas and prohibited ammunition during the campaign. The European nations, including Belgium, leave the population to their own devices.

(War Heritage Institute, Brussels, rights reserved)

The consecutive Belgian military missions in Ethiopia between 1930 and 1935 have to be viewed in this light. Those missions followed top secret negotiations between the Belgian government and the Ethiopian emperor Ras Tafari Makonnen, where at the request of the monarch, thirteen officers-instructors were sent to the East African country between 1930 and 1935. These officers were mainly in charge of the training and modernisation of the Ethiopian army. For the Ethiopians, the arrival of the Belgian military advisers led by Major Ernest Polet and Auguste Dothée was a way to obtain much-needed European military expertise, without having to call on the great colonial powers, Great Britain and France in particular. The Belgian government was particularly interested in trade benefits, as demonstrated by the large armament order placed by the Ethiopian government with FN Herstal in the margin of these missions.

The imminent invasion by fascist Italy put an end to the Belgian-Ethiopian military co-operation. Our country decided to fall back on its traditional neutrality: the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Paul Hymans, ended the mission and the armament