Belgium Deserts its Wife:
Neutrality and European Politics, 1936

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Between March and October of 1936 Belgium, "the keystone of Europe," altered its foreign policy from alliance with France to neutrality or, as Belgian leaders preferred to call it, "independence." [1] By the end of the following spring, the revolution in Belgian foreign policy was complete: Belgium, formerly a fully participating adherent to the Locarno pact of 1925, was guaranteed by France, Great Britain and Germany without guaranteeing those nations in return. The Belgian reversal played an important role in the European international politics of the 1930's. It was among the first indications that the smaller European nations had lost hope in the concept of collective security. Secondly, it forced a reconsideration of French strategic planning. Offensively, the alteration of the Franco-German military frontier would prove an obstacle to any attempt on France's part to aid its Eastern allies by taking offensive action against Germany. In the event of a German attack, France would have to stand on its political borders, rather than giving battle along the more natural Franco-German frontier offered by Belgium's Meuse River. Finally, Belgium's policy of *mains libres* emphasized the rise of German and British influence on the continent and the decline of France's post-World War I security arrangements.

Belgium's international difficulties were created above all by its vulnerable geographical position. Situated along the traditional path of attack between Germany and France, in an age of air and sea power Belgium also found itself crucial to British security. The geographical factor was clear from the moment of Belgium's alliance with France in 1920. French Marshall Ferdinand Foch noted in his *cahiers* entry of July 5, 1920 that a Belgian alliance was crucial for his nation, for Belgium had always been the "meeting ground for decisive battles between France and Western Europe

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on the one hand, and Germany and Central Europe on the other." [2] Nor did the strategic importance of Belgium escape its own leaders. "Belgium is not, in Europe, an out of the way corner of land, whose scanty territory renders her negligible," Foreign Minister Karl Jaspar wrote in March, 1924. "She is an essential factor in the solution of many problems." [3] Although political realities had changed by 1936, geographical considerations remained crucial in Belgian diplomacy. Commenting on King Leopold's speech of October, 1936, which outlined the shift in his nation's foreign policy, Prime Minister Paul van Zeeland noted that "it now seems to Belgium that the only course she can pursue is to do her utmost to prevent her soil from once more becoming a highway for foreign armies." [4]

Politics, both external and internal, complicated Belgium's position. The external danger was obvious: the major powers that surrounded Belgium were traditionally hostile to one another. The internal situtation, though more complicated, was equally important. The nation's politics were twice divided. First, the cultural-linguistic division between Walloon and Fleming mirrored the external influences of France and Germany. The Flemish element of the population, which was steadily increasing its political power, held no brief for continued military ties with France. An equally serious breach existed between the established elements of Belgium's parliamentary government and the political extremes. The elections of May, 1936 resulted in significant political inroads for the Rexist [5] and Flemish National parties, both of which took violent issue with Belgium's ties to France. Belgium's foreign policy, then, had implications beyond the response to external threats. It bore heavily on the survival both of the Belgian nation and of its parliamentary state.

Post-World War II historians debate whether internal or external concerns were more important in the shaping of Belgian foreign policy during the 1930's. The current consensus appears to emphasize domestic politics. This particular question may be less important than it at first seems. Although domestic politics first pushed Belgium on the road to a more independent foreign policy, the shift in the European equilibrium, so apparent after the German reoccupation of the Rhineland, shaped the new Belgian diplomacy. Domestic politics ordained a shift in Belgium's stance, but the diplomatic situation gave even those Belgians who most

enthusiastically supported ties to France little reason to resist this change. Domestic politics, moreover, would have hindered any Belgian attempt to reassert itself within a Western alliance system. The interplay of internal and external events demanded a more independent Belgium. This small, threatened European nation was, during the 1930's, a perfect example of the intimate relationship between domestic and international politics in a Western democracy.

II

By the spring of 1936 even the most Francophile Belgians were forced to reconsider whether the military alliance with France was in their nation's best interests. Belgium appeared to be committed to the defense of a declining continental power. Although the shift in the European equilibrium may have been enough to initiate a Belgian reassessment of its international position, the French could not have offended their smaller ally more if they had so intended. French Marshall Philippe Pétain, the hero of the last war, had suggested that in the event of a Franco-German war, French troops would enter Belgium even if the latter were not attacked by Germany.[6] General Maurice Gamelin, Chief of Staff of the French Army in 1940, confirmed France's ulterior motives on the Belgian front in his memoirs. Noting that "the occupation of the front Namur-Antwerp divided the war from our northern provinces," he argued that "if one considers the devastation that a modern battle entails in the region where it takes place, isn't this argument [for a French occupation of Belgium] more convincing?" [7] Nor did France's economic policy during the Depression soothe Belgian feelings. France raised barriers against the import of Belgian goods by placing import quotas on top of high protective tariffs. Moreover, Walloon workers regularly crossing the border to work in France were poorly treated. France appeared to treat its neighbor equally only when it sought support for its program of European security.[8]

Catholic, middle-class Belgium's patience was exasperated when France negotiated in 1935 and ratified in 1936 a military pact with the Soviet Union. France's alliances with other Eastern European nations, negotiated during the 1920's, already created a dilemma for the Belgian Foreign Ministry. Would Belgium, militarily allied

with France, be forced to go to war with Germany as a result of German aggression against an Eastern state allied with France? Hitler's aggressive Eastern diplomacy seemed to increase Belgium's responsibilities. The Franco-Soviet pact implied not only an extra, indirect commitment for Belgium, but a commitment to a despised communist state. French diplomats, who no longer expected Belgium to support France in a conflict between the Soviet Union and Germany, knew of the political costs of the new alliance.[9]

Domestic political considerations, which became a very important factor earlier in 1936 with the introduction of the van Zeeland government's military bill, reinforced the case for a more independent course for Belgium. A military commission reported in February of 1936 that Belgium was not militarily prepared to meet its European commitments. German political developments, Germany's rearmament, and reports that Hitler would no longer recognize a demilitarized Rhineland emphasized the danger of such inadequacy. Van Zeeland suspected that internal German unrest would encourage foreign adventures; yet Belgium's external commitments hindered parliamentary acceptance of needed military improvements. Thus, domestic political necessity accelerated the unravelling of the alliance with France. As early as March of 1931 a Belgian Foreign Minister had suggested that the bilateral alliance with France had been superceded by the Locarno agreement. By February of 1936, the Secretary-General of the Belgian Foreign Ministry, Fernand van Langenhove, was in Paris negotiating an end to the alliance. On his final day in the French capital, February 27, the military bill received its first defeat in the Belgian lower house. The negotiations had, however, freed Belgium from the French alliance. On the sixth of March the government announced that general-staff discussions would be all that remained of the former alliance. On the following day, German troops marched into the Rhineland.[10]

Little evidence exists that the abrogation of the bilateral defense agreement had anything to do with Hitler's decision to occupy the Rhineland; as early as January of 1936 Belgian officials had forseen the possibility of some German initiative. France's Secretary-General of the Foreign Ministry, Alexis Saint-Léger, suggested to the Belgian ambassador in Paris, Count André Kerchove de Denterghem, that the Germans might reassert their

sovereignty in the Rhineland by military attack or smaller actions that would endanger international legal principles. Kerchove added a third possibility: Germany might claim that France, Britain and Belgium had violated the Locarno Treaty, and thus excuse its operation.[11] Kerchove's hunch was correct. Arguing that the Franco-Soviet pact was aimed directly at Germany (which it was) and was thus a violation of the Locarno agreement, Germany announced that it had "restored the full and unrestricted sovereignty of Germany in the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland." [12] The Rhineland reoccupation was a double blow to the Western security system. The first and most obvious result was the lack of a forceful reaction by the other Locarno powers. On a more practical level, the German action eliminated most of France's military options. Not only had the Rhineland been an effective buffer for France and Belgium, it had also been crucial to France's Eastern commitments by offering an undefended path to the industrial heartland of Germany in the event of German aggression in the East.[13]

Both before and after the German action, Belgium indicated that the larger European powers must consider themselves responsible for the maintenance of the status quo in the West.[14] That the weight of the alliance lay with France and Britain was, of course, obvious; Belgium was no more able than the Netherlands or Switzerland to force its opinion on Germany. Although Belgium's negotiations with France may have influenced the passive response of its former allies, the roots of Western passivity ran deeper than the abrogation of the military agreement. Hitler later bragged that he had bluffed two stronger adversaries into inaction.[15] Van Zeeland later attributed Belgium's lack of confidence in France and Britain to the "traditional policy of 'wait and see' " that the Western powers followed.[16] The Anglo-French response to the German reoccupation of the Rhineland gave Belgian proponents of a Western alliance little leverage in the debate over Belgium's place in European international politics.

Belgian voters elected a new parliament on May 24; to the pessimism of the international scene they added the pessimism of domestic politics. Two months before the election van Zeeland confessed his doubts about the capabilities of parliamentary governments during national crises; his fears were apparently confirmed by the decision of the Belgian electorate.[17] The

Socialist-Catholic-Liberal governing bloc retained parliamentary control, but the electorate appeared to be moving towards the political extremes. The Catholics lost sixteen seats and the Liberals one, while the Rexists, previously unrepresented, elected twenty-one deputies. The Flemish Nationalists earned sixteen seats (a gain of eight), and the Communists nine. One of nine Belgians, including one of six French-speakers, voted for the Rexists, whose young leader, Léon Degrelle, campaigned heavily against a military alliance that left Belgium "saddled tightly to a French horse with a Red rider." [18] Furthermore, the degree of support enjoyed by the Flemish Nationalists appeared ominous for a culturally divided nation. In time of crisis, particularly one involving France and Germany, could Belgian leaders make even the basic assumption of national unity? A pair of ensuing political developments promised further trouble for supporters of the French alliance. On July 19 the Flemish wing of the Catholic party set up its own organization, and on October 8 Degrelle announced an agreement between the Rexists and the Flemish Nationalists based upon their mutual dedication to authoritarianism and corporatism, their admiration of Hitler and Franco, and their disapproval of France and the military alliance.[19]

Thus, both domestic politics and the shift in the European balance dictated a more independent international stance for Belgium. Even before the election had underlined the political necessity of deemphasizing the French alliance, van Langenhove thought the international situation demanded a new policy of independence. Belgium would be invaded, he surmised, if one power saw a strategic advantage in passing through Belgium to strike at its enemy (the advantage was obvious), or if one of the powers had reason to believe that Belgium was favoring the other. Thus, concluded van Langenhove, Belgium had to discourage intervention by means of a strong military defense, an entirely independent foreign policy without obligation, and an assurance that should one power violate Belgian neutrality, Great Britain as well as the other affected Continental power would react. On July 7, just before the first public indication of Belgium's shift, van Langenhove added that for reasons of internal strength as well as international security "our obligations must be limited to those that are strictly indispensable." [20]

On July 20 Paul-Henri Spaak, a young Socialist who was the new Belgian Foreign Minister, gave a hint of a change when, in his maiden speech before a group of foreign correspondents, he declared, "I wish only one thing, a foreign policy exclusively and integrally Belgian." [21] The final word on Belgian foreign policy came in October, as King Leopold III, in a published speech to his cabinet, announced that Belgium had severed its military alliances and was resuming its pre-1914 neutrality. The German occupation of the Rhineland had completely altered Belgium's international standing, Leopold declared, and not even defensive alliances were viable, because "aid could not reach us before the first shock of the invasion, which might be overpowering and against which we must be prepared to fight alone." Collective security had failed, the King added, and Belgium was faced with entanglement in the affairs of other states. The rearmament of Germany, Russia and Italy had increased European tensions, and the new technology of war, such as aviation and mechanization, created a particularly dangerous situation for smaller powers.[22] Spaak emphasized that his and the King's speeches did not fundamentally alter Belgium's foreign policy. Rather, they sought to avoid the involvement of Belgium in a war while ensuring that, by using the Belgian Army in a strictly defensive posture, its people would, if necessary, put forward the greatest possible military effort.[23]

The Chamber of Deputies endorsed the new policy of *mains libres* on October 29 by a vote of 126 to 42. Now the way was clear for the government to achieve its initial goal, passage of the military bill. On December 2 the Chamber approved it by a vote of 145 to 40, with eighty-nine abstentions. Military expenditures increased by 380 million francs, or fifty percent, from 1934-35 to 1936-37, while the extension of the period of military service increased the army by one-third. Belgium would now base its international relations on the curious formula of "independence without prewar neutrality." [24] Simply put, the Belgians would be willing to participate in a collective security system, but not in any agreement linking it to other powers. A new Locarno agreement with France and Germany was unacceptable, declared Prime Minister van Zeeland, because "a treaty signed by five powers, when reduced to three presents a very different and new situation." [25]

As it was, Belgium could not have asked for a more favorable dénouement. British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden guaranteed Belgium's frontiers in his November 20 speech on rearmament, while Foreign Minister Yvon Delbos added French support in a December 4 address to the Chamber of Deputies. In January of 1937 Hitler followed with an offer to recognize and guarantee the neutrality of Belgium and the Netherlands. Four months later Belgium was invited to join other non-aligned European nations in a conference on the League of Nations.[26] At the time, Belgian diplomacy seemed brilliantly successful. Relying on the defensive needs of France and Great Britain, Belgium found itself a guaranteed nation without its former obligations as a guarantor. It could now rearm with the knowledge that the Rexists and the Flemish Nationalists had been co-opted on foreign policy issues.

III

"While I expected that His Majesty's recent speech would arouse interest abroad," van Zeeland told an American official in Brussels, "I was surprised by the extent of such interests and the differences in interpretation on the part of various foreign governments." [27] Interpretations of Belgian foreign policy depended upon the effect of *mains libres* on the interpreter's nation. Two points of interest dominated the discussion: was this a sudden change in policy and, if so, just what did Belgian independence mean? France, of course, was the most immediately affected European power, and its response was sometimes cynical. Van Zeeland sought "to endow Belgium with an army sufficiently strong to permit them to practice a policy not of *neutrality* (the word must not be pronounced!), but of *independence* or, according to the text, of *'immunity,'* " reported the French military attaché in Brussels. "The very definition of this policy remains obscure," he continued. "One cannot see very well where *independence* ends and where *neutrality* begins." [28] The French chargé in Brussels, finding sinister implications in the King's most trivial behavior, suggested that the Belgian monarch's travel habits indicated a preference for Sweden, Switzerland, England and Holland to France. Besides, the chargé added, Leopold's advisors were pro-Flemish and anti-French.[29] Many Frenchmen must have shared their former Foreign Minister Louis Barthou's interpretation of the

Franco-Belgian relationship, expressed two years earlier at a lunch with Eden and van Zeeland. "It's quite simple," Barthou explained. "Belgium has a wife, France, and a mistress, England. That is why Belgium pays more attention to the mistress than to the wife." [30]

Most of the French analyses were more reasoned, if not more optimistic. Belgian neutrality came as no surprise to the Quai d'Orsay. The Russian alliance and Popular Front government made Belgium wary of its ties with France, and there was feeling in Brussels that the Spanish Civil War had increased the danger of international conflict. The traditionally pro-French Liberal party, moreover, had been forced by domestic politics to compromise; Albert Devèze, Minister of War and the father of the military bill, was among the party's leaders. France hoped that Belgian adherence to the principles of the League of Nations would guarantee its continued role in international politics; yet the possibility that the increased vulnerability of a non-aligned Belgium might make a German attack more, rather than less likely, was most troubling. Hitler knew that France would never violate Belgian territory, but he himself was not above such action.[31] Furthermore, the psychological blow to the French security system was as costly as the actual strategic losses due to Belgian neutrality. "I sensed with cruel anguish," French Prime Minister Leon Blum recalled, "that here was a new sign, a new symptom of the progressive dismantling of all of our European positions." [32]

Eastern European nations allied with France were also vitally affected by Belgium's new policy. If France could not react against Germany in the West, or even if the threat of a French response was discredited, Germany would be in a position to work its will in the East. Nevertheless, opinion in Central and Eastern Europe was mixed. The response was most unfavorable in the Soviet Union, perhaps with the defeat of 1917 and the harsh terms Germany demanded at Brest-Litovsk in mind. Soviet displeasure could only increase as it considered the role of the Franco-Soviet pact in Belgium's decision. Leopold's speech, the American chargé in Moscow reported, came as "a distinct shock to those Governmental and Party officials charged with the carrying out of Soviet foreign policies." Yet France itself shared the blame for Belgium's decision, for, as the American reported, the Soviet press had long warned that the French vacillation would drive the small European nations either into neutrality or under the influence of Germany.

The aggressiveness of Germany and Italy, Moscow argued, exacerbated the uncertain policies of France and Britain.[33] Furthermore, the Soviets suggested that Leopold's "independence" was an indication of the influence of "fascism" and German influence in Belgium, as well as evidence of the Belgian royal family's ties to the Italian House of Savoy.[34]

France's weakened position in the West was a greater threat to Poland than to the Soviet Union, but Polish reaction to Belgian neutrality was more varied. Poland felt that Belgian neutrality would alter the strategic balance in the West, and thus the relationship of France and Poland as allies. A clause in the Polish treaty with France recognized a German attack on Belgium as a *casus belli.* Yet Polish Foreign Minister Joseph Beck was a friend and admirer of King Leopold, and Belgium and Poland shared similar problems as buffers between antagonistic powers.[35] Most dangerous from a military point of view was the shortened Franco-German frontier which, Polish military strategists believed, could be defended by half of the German Army, freeing the rest to act elsewhere.[36] Czechoslovakian opinion was also split, with conservatives suggesting that Belgium's foreign policy resulted from the radicalization of French politics, and Socialists emphasizing a victory for the clerical and conservative elements of Belgian society.[37] Yugoslavia feared that Belgium's new policy, which broke the *"bloc homogène"* of Britain, France and Belgium, would have a serious effect on Yugoslavian diplomacy.[38] Hungary claimed that Belgium's rejection of security pacts was justification of its own policy, with the passage of the military bill setting a precedent for Hungarian rearmament.[39]

France's loss was Germany's gain, and Germans recognized the advantages of Belgian neutrality. The German reaction to Spaak's July speech was so unanimously favorable that it may have cost the Foreign Minister support among his fellow Belgian Socialists.[40] Germans interpreted the shift in Belgium's international position as consistent with tendencies first demonstrated in 1931. The German Minister in Belgium suggested that the improvement in the Belgian Army was a small price to pay for Belgian neutrality.[41] The gains made by Communists in France and the possibility of a Socialist-Communist Popular Front in Belgium forced van Zeeland to alter his foreign policy, according to German opinion; but neutrality would only delay the coming to power of an

anti-bolshevik Rexist-Flemish alliance. Germans also considered neutrality an act of independence from France, a blow to the French security system, and a setback to the negotiations for a new Locarno Pact.[42] Leopold's speech, interpreted as anti-Soviet in import, met with nearly unanimous approval in Rome, although the Italian Foreign Minister, Count Galeazzo Ciano, felt it would have little effect on Italian foreign policy.[43]

Mains libres was warmly received in the Netherlands, yet it had little effect on a Dutch Foreign Ministry that took greater pains in its neutrality than Belgium ever intended. Holland felt that Belgium's shift was an endorsement of its own position, which it considered the safest course for a relatively small European nation. Like Belgium, the Netherlands placed its integrity in the hands of British interests; Britain, the Dutch correctly surmised, could never allow a German occupation of the Low Countries.[44] As for its own neutrality, the Netherlands' Foreign Minister made it clear that, in the American Minister's words, "it will sign no pact guaranteeing something which it already considers axiomatic." [45] Holland knew that like its neighbor it could be guaranteed without being a guarantor. Neither Germany nor the Western allies could afford to see the other dominate the Low Countries. Unfortunately, both Belgium and Holland would learn that their independence, which rested upon the European equilibrium, could survive only as long as the equilibrium itself.

As the guarantor both of Belgium and the apparent balance between France and Germany, Britain's opinion was most important. The Foreign Office received Leopold's speech with a degree of sympathy. The English Channel and the North Sea, of course, provided Britain with a good deal more protection than the Franco-Belgian border gave France, and the new Belgian policy could be interpreted in London as a shift to British influence rather than a boon to Germany. Van Zeeland, visiting London a month after the King's speech, found Eden with no preconceptions about Belgian foreign policy.[46] Indeed, the British Chiefs of Staff saw some advantages in Belgian neutrality. The threat of British intervention to protect Belgium might deter a German violation of its neutrality. Moreover, it would be to the Western allies' advantage to limit the area of war as much as possible; this end was served by Belgian neutrality. Finally, the Joint Chiefs felt that Belgian neutrality would contribute more to Britain's air defense

than it would limit Britain's air offensive against Germany (an opinion that was not shared by their French counterparts). Yet the Chiefs of Staff argued that Britain had "most to gain by an effective Belgain neutrality"; although Germany could not be trusted to honor Belgian neutrality, the longer an attack on the Low Countries was deferred, the better Britain would be prepared to resist it.[47] Britain's good relations with Belgium were solidified during the spring of 1937 when Leopold made a state visit to London. The Belgian monarch, considered to be pro-Nazi before the visit, "very favourably impressed" Eden with his knowledge of foreign affairs.[48] Britain, forced for practical reasons to guarantee its cross-channel neighbor, seemed to have few qualms about Belgian neutrality.

IV

How crucial was the Belgian decision to follow an independent course in European politics? What effect did Belgian neutrality have on Europe's strategic balance? A Briton, a Frenchman, a German or a Czech would have answered differently. One thing, however, was certain; even the most pessimistic (generally a French) interpretation of *mains libres* failed to predict the Western debacle of 1940. Belgium's new diplomatic stance might prove a hinderance, or at worst a missing link along the Western defense front, but the forty-day collapse of what some considered Europe's finest army seemed virtually impossible. The obvious result of Belgian neutrality was the inability of France to strike against Germany — if it had been so willing — to defend its Eastern allies. French defense of its own frontier was made more difficult; yet the French collapse of 1940 was anticipated by neither the French nor the Belgians.

By 1936 Belgian leaders realized that their defense depended as much on Britain as on France. Like its neighbor to the north, Belgium placed its faith not in a mutual defense treaty with Great Britain, but in the strategic importance of the Low Countries as the first line of defense for the British Isles. In London, the opinion of Belgium's gains from its neutrality was mixed, but much more favorable than opinion in Paris. A "most secret" British strategic assessment noted in mid-November of 1937 that "the effective value of the Belgian armaments industry is less than that of the

French; war reserves are very seriously deficient, and the fact that the bulk of the armament factories are close to the German frontier makes it impossible to rely upon their output in war." Neither Britain nor France were ready to go to war; perhaps Belgian neutrality, which offered at least a chance of avoiding conflict, was for the best.[49] France, however, attempted to scare Britain into opposition to Belgian "independence" even before Leopold's speech. In a Foreign Ministry note of September, 1936, the French predicted dire military consequences for Britain in the event that Belgium did not cooperate with the Western nations against Germany. There would be great difficulty defending Belgian ports, which were of crucial importance to Britain; French and Belgian troops would quite possibly be turned and cut off in Belgium; France and Britain would be increasingly vulnerable to air attack, while Belgian neutrality would lessen German vulnerability; and, finally, the possibility of the allies taking the war to Germany would be greatly reduced.[50]

Yet Britain continued to place its faith in Belgian neutrality. More importantly, it placed its faith in Germany's willingness to abide by Belgium's decision. Late in 1937 Sir Thomas Inskip, British Minister for the Coordination of Defences, took an optimistic view of Belgium's new course. Reporting on future defense needs, Inskip argued that "Germany had guaranteed the inviolability and integrity of Belgian territory and there seems good reasons for thinking that it would be in Germany's interests to honor this agreement." Belgium, argued the "most secret" memorandum of relative national military strength, was putting its defenses in order; "the completion of these will increase her chances of remaining neutral, an attitude which, from the military point of view, is to the advantage of France and ourselves." [51] Britain, without Central and Eastern European commitments of its own, tended to downplay the French obligations to its allies. However, more cautious views could also be found in England. The Defense Requirements subcommittee had argued as early as 1934 that "if the Low Countries were in the hands of a hostile power, not only would the frequency and intensity of air attack on London be increased, but the whole of the industrial areas of the Midlands and North of England would be brought within the area of penetration of hostile air attacks." Nevertheless, perhaps Belgian neutrality was best if it limited the spread of war; the same report

declared that the most important British military deficiency was in the projected defense of the Low Countries.[52] Yet even the most pessimistic British appraisal of Belgian neutrality assumed continued contact between general-staffs to plan for the possibilities of war. In May of 1939, however, the Belgians snubbed a British military emmisary to Brussels; midway through the Polish campaign of 1939 British officials even believed that Belgium might allow the German Army transport through its territory rather than resist as it had in 1914.[53]

France's impotence resulted more from its national pessimism and the continual political crises after 1934 than from Belgian neutrality. Again, international events and domestic politics interacted to dictate a more conservative foreign policy for a continental nation. In France's case, Belgian "independence" merely reinforced the defeatism that had pervaded French thought since earlier in the decade. Nevertheless, the loss of Belgium as an ally had serious strategic consequences. A neutral observer at the time of the Munich crisis reported that "France could intervene on land only by throwing her forces futilely against the German fortifications on the North and the Rhine on the South." France, essentially, had no options, for "all recent military operations have proved the defense to be so strong that there is no possibility of breaking through except for slow, costly concentrations of superior resources, which superiority is lacking in France today." [54] Indeed, Hitler came to believe that France had written off its Czech ally.[55] William C. Bullitt, an acute American observer of European politics, suggested that Belgian neutrality, which may have strengthened France's defensive position, was on the other hand a staggering blow to the latter's Eastern allies. "Indeed," Bullitt reported, "there is a general agreement that recent developments are closing rapidly the door to French influence in Central and Eastern Europe." [56]

Foremost among France's problems was the question of northern defenses. The flat, muddy terrain along the frontier made impossible an extension of the magnificent Maginot Line; even if it had been possible, diplomatic considerations would have argued against the fortification of the border with Belgium. The best possible permanent positions were well within French territory, and would have exposed Lille, the northern industrial region, and important railroad networks. The French General Staff was

convinced that a stand would have to be made within Belgium, but naturally the Belgians thought this best avoided.[57] Belgium saw its role, in the event of German aggression, as preventing access across its territory to either side. Shortly after Leopold's speech, Kerchove told Delbos that if Belgium were directly attacked during a German offensive, there would be no limitation whatsoever on French passage. If France were attacked indirectly as a result of its treaty obligations, there would be no right of passage. If France were directly attacked, Belgium would abide by the decision of the League of Nations, with special attention to British intentions.[58] French confidence in Belgium's determination to defend its "independence" faltered, however, with the increase in the frequency and the seriousness of the continental crises. By 1938, French leaders considered Leopold pro-Nazi and doubted Belgium's determination to defend its territory.[59] Belgium did make clear its resistence to any French attempt to trespass; during the first Czechoslovakian crisis of 1938, the Belgians held maneuvers along the French frontier in order, Laroche was told, "to show you that if you come our way in order to support Czechoslovakia you will run up against the Belgian army." [60]

Belgian neutrality, then, was at best a hinderance to France. That Belgium might serve with a neutral Switzerland to anchor the flanks of the French defense must have been encouraging to the progressively more pessimistic French. Yet this neutrality depended upon Germany's respect for international principle, which no Frenchman was about to overestimate. Belgium was a pawn to German morality. If Germany found advantage in violating Belgian "independence" it would begin a race between the powers to see whether the Western allies could set up defensive lines before it was too late. French military leaders had little faith that they could. Belgian neutrality also struck a blow at the effectiveness of the French alliance system; this, however, may not have been a major loss to the French. The Belgians merely saved the French some difficult decisions as Germany became more aggressive in the East. There is, after all, no assurance that a defensive, deeply pessimistic France was anxious to aid its Eastern allies, whatever Belgium's position.

For Belgium itself neutrality was a gamble. France's ability to defeat Germany meant little to Belgium, for its leaders could be assured of one thing: in any conflict between Germany and France

the Low Countries would be the principal battleground. Thus, a military alliance was useful to Belgium only if it could deter war. With every day, however, armed conflict seemed more and more likely. Neutrality was a gamble, as Belgium was forced to rely upon Germany's word. Yet, an alliance with France and Britain also relied upon their word, and as Czechoslovakia discovered, this too was a mistake. France was quite obviously in decline, while the British had set a low priority on cooperation with its allies.[61] As a British Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs noted before the previous war, respect for and defense of Belgian neutrality depended upon the interests of the powers involved.[62] Unfortunately for the Belgians, all of the major European powers thought it in their interests to ensure a friendly Belgium. In May of 1940 Germany's interests overcame its scruples. Within seventeen days of the begining of the German invasion King Leopold sued for an armistice, and Belgium was to spend more than four years under Nazi occupation.

It is too easy to read the events of 1940 into the Belgian decisions of 1936. At the time of the abrogation of the military agreement and the first steps towards neutrality, these decisions appeared sound. Collective security had been proved ineffective by Italian troops in Ethiopia and German troops in the Rhineland. Belgium found itself attached to a declining star, France, and thus a potential antagonist of a rising power, Germany. It is not fair to blame Belgium for the lack of French or British determination during the succession of crises between the German occupation of the Rhineland and the Franco-German armistice of June, 1940. Nor is it certain that French troops, so ineffective in the defense of their own territory in 1940, would have been able to hold a defensive line in Belgium, particularly considering the German use of mechanized warfare and airborne troops. Furthermore, domestic political considerations would have forced the Belgian government to leave a French alliance even if the alliance were obviously effective (although the ineffectiveness of the alliance was certainly a reason for its lack of popularity in Belgium). The Belgian decisions of 1936 made a good bit of sense from Belgium's internal and external perspective, even if they were not the best from the point of view of general Western security. Europe in 1936 was quite different from the Europe of 1920, when the agreement with France was signed, or the Europe of 1925, when the Belgians agreed to the Locarno pact.

Ironies abound in the international politics of the 1930's. The victor of the last war, France, was already taking on the appearance of the vanquished. States long a part of the Austrian Empire were becoming territories of the German Reich. Belgium, invaded and brutally suppressed by Germany twenty years earlier, placed its faith (and its fate) squarely in the hands of Hitler. Belgium's Socialist Prime Minister turned his back on the French Popular Front government in the name of nationalism. Equally ironic was the fact that Belgium, in order to ensure its national unity, took diplomatic steps that later led to the loss of its national integrity. It is not so ironic, however, in light of the experience of the thirties, that after the Second World War Belgian leaders, Spaak foremost among them, were in the vanguard of the movement for European unity.

NOTES

[1] For an overview of Belgian foreign policy during this era, see Jonathan E. Helmreich, *Belgium and Europe: A Study in Small Power Diplomacy* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976); David Owen Kieft, *Belgium's Return to Neutrality: An Essay in the Frustrations of Small Power Diplomacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); Pierre Henri Laurent, "The Reversal of Belgian Foreign Policy, 1936-1937," *Review of Politics* 31:3 (July, 1969), pp. 370-84; Jane K. Miller, *Belgian Foreign Policy between Two Wars, 1919-1940* (New York: Bookman, 1951); Paul Henri Spaak, *Combats Inachievées,* vol. I: *De Indépendence à l'Alliance* (Paris: Fayard, 1969); J. Wullus-Rudiger, *pseud.* [Armand Wullus], *Les Origines Internationales du Drame Belge de 1940* (Brussels: Éditions Vanderlinden, 1950); and Paul van Zeeland, "Aims of Recent Belgian Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 18:1 (October, 1939), pp. 140-48.

[2] Judith M. Hughes, *To the Maginot Line: The Politics of French Military Preparation in the 1920's* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 66.

[3] Helmreich, *Belgium and Europe,* p. 266.

[4] See the report of a conversation between van Zeeland and Commander John A. Gade, American Naval Attaché in Brussels, which was written by Lt. Colonel Sumner Waite, Military Attaché in Paris, Military Intelligence Division report no. 2657-Y-323/25, Military Records Division, Record Group 165, U.S. National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter MID with document number).

[5] The Rexists and the Flemish Nationalists were the two mass movements of the Belgian Right. Led by the charismatic Leon Degrelle, the pseudo-religious Rexist program (it derived its name from "Christ the King") combined authoritarianisn with an admiration for Mussolini's corporatism. In the election of 1936, however, the Rexists deemphasized their radical tendencies and ran on a progressive platform which favored, among other things, women's suffrage and the end of Sunday closing laws for saloons. In foreign policy, the Rexists called for the end of the Franco-Belgian alliance. Taking advantage of the Franco-Soviet pact of 1935, their

slogan was "Either Rex or Moscow." See Jean Stengers, "Belgium," in *The European Right: A Historical Profile,* edited by Hans Rogger and Eugen Weber (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), pp. 128-67; and Thomas Glynn Bradley, Jr., "The Rexist Movement in Belgium, 1935-1937," unpublished Masters thesis, University of Virginia, 1973, passim.

[6] Helmreich, *Belgium and Europe,* p. 322.

[7] Hughes, *To the Maginot Line,* pp. 218-19.

[8] Helmreich, *Belgium and Europe,* p. 49.

[9] See Kieft, *Belgium's Return to Neutrality,* p. 50; and the unsigned French Foreign Ministry note of January 27, 1936, on the possible repercussions of the Franco-Soviet Pact, in Ministère des Affaires Étrangeres, Commission de publication des documents relatifs aux origines de la guerre, 1939-1945, *Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1932-1939,* 2[e] serie (1936-1939) (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1963-1966), I, p. 153 (hereafter *DDF,* with series, volume and page number).

[10] Laurent, "The Reversal of Belgian Foreign Policy," p. 373; Morris to Hull, February 21, 1936, U.S. State Department Decimal File, no. 855.00/26, Record Group 59, U.S. National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter SDF with document number); Anthony Eden, *Facing the Dictators: The Memoirs of Anthony Eden, Earl of Avon* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), p. 374; Hughes, *To the Maginot Line,* p. 220; Kieft, *Belgium's Return to Neutrality,* p. 55.

[11] Kerchove to van Zeeland, January 30, 1936, in Académie Royal de Belgique, Commission Royale d'Histoire, *Documents Diplomatiques Belges, 1920-1940: La Politique de Sécurité Exterieure,* edited by Ch. de Visscher and F. van Langenhove, vols. IV, V: 1936-40 (Brussels: Palaise des Académies, 1965-66), IV, pp. 63-67 (hereafter *DDB* with volume and page number).

[12] The official statement of the German Government of the Rhineland reoccupation is published in U.S. Department of State, *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945,* series C, vol. V (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1966), pp. 17-18 (hereafter *DGFP* with series, volume and page number).

[13] William L. Schirer, *The Collapse of the Third Republic: An Inquiry into the Fall of France in 1940* (New York: Pocket Books p.b., 1971), p. 233.

[14] Laroche to Flandin, February 1, 1936, *DDF,* 2, I, p. 173; Flandin to French diplomatic representives in European capitals and Washington, March 11, 1936, *ibid.,* p. 493.

[15] *Hitler's Secret Conversations, 1941-1944,* translated by Norman Cameron and R.H. Stevens, introduction by H.R. Trevor-Roper (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1953), pp. 211-12.

[16] van Zeeland, "Recent Belgian Foreign Policy," p. 141.

[17] Gade memorandum, March 30, 1936, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers* (Washington: Government Printing Office, continuous publication), 1936, I, pp. 271-72 (hereafter *FR* with year, volume and page number).

[18] Degrelle is quoted in Laurent, "The Reversal of Belgian Foreign Policy," pp. 375-76. For the Belgian election results, see *The New York Times,* May 26, 1936.

[19] Helmreich, *Belgium and Europe,* p. 335.

[20] See the van Langenhove notes of April 25 and July 7, 1936, *DDB,* IV, pp. 215, 234.

[21] Spaak, *Combats Inachievées,* I, p. 45.

[22] For Leopold's speech, see *DDB,* IV, pp. 324-28, and *The New York Times,* October 15, 1936.

[23] Spaak, *Combats Inachievées,* I, p. 52-53.

[24] *The New York Times,* October 30, December 3, 1936; Laurent, "The Reversal of Belgian Foreign Policy," p. 382n.

[25] Report of Gade-van Zeeland conversation by Waite, November 19, 1936, MID 2657-Y-323/25.

[26] Kieft, *Belgium's Return to Neutrality,* p. 156; Helmreich, *Belgium and Europe,* p. 341; Ministry of Foreign Affairs circular of information no. 60, September 15, 1939, *DDB,* V, pp. 353-58.

[27] Report of Gade-van Zeeland conversation by Waite, November 19, 1936, MID 2657-Y-323/25; Helmreich, *Belgium and Europe,* p. 338.

[28] General Riedinger to Daladier, November 18, 1936, *DDF,* 2, III, pp. 801-2.

[29] Gazel to Delbos, August 11, 1936, *ibid.,* pp. 187-88.

[30] Eden, *Facing the Dictators,* p. 104.

[31] See Gazel to Delbos, August 11, 1936, *DDF,* 2, III, pp. 182-91; Laroche to Delbos, October 15, 1936, *ibid.,* pp. 547-49; Bullitt to Hull, October 16, 1936, SDF 751.55/29; N.H. Gibbs, *Rearmament Policy,* vol. I of *History of the Second World War: United Kingdom Military Series,* edited by J.R.H. Butler (London: HMSO, 1976), p. 619; Paul Reynaud, *In the Thick of the Fight, 1930-1945,* translated by James D. Lambert (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), pp. 153-54.

[32] Joel Colton, *Leon Blum: Humanist in Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press p.b., 1966), p. 207.

[33] Henderson to Hull, October 28, 1936, SDF 755.00/44.

[34] Payart to Delbos, October 17, 1936, *DDF,* 2, III, pp. 562-63.

[35] See Lukasiewicz to Beck, March 19, 1937, in Waclaw Jedrzejewicz, ed., *Diplomat in Paris, 1936-1939: Papers and Memoirs of Julius Lukasiewicz, Ambassador of Poland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 42, and Joseph Beck, *Dernier Rapport: Politique Polonaise, 1926-1939* (Paris, Les Éditions de la Baconniere, 1951), p. 112. For a discussion of the Franco-Polish treaty and Belgium, see Jedrzejewicz, ed., *Diplomat in Paris,* p. 221.

[36] Biddle to Hull, October 22, 1937, SDF 740.0011 Mutual Guarantee (Locarno), 943.

[37] Wright to Hull, October 22, 1936, SDF 755.00/45.

[38] Memorandum of van Zuylen conversation with Yugoslavian Minister in Brussels, Karovitch, October 21, 1936, *DDB,* IV, pp. 380-81.

[39] Montgomery to Hull, November 6, 1936, SDF 755.00/46.

[40] Laroche to Delbos, July 24, 1936, *DDF,* 2, III, pp. 51-52.

[41] von Richthofen to the German Foreign Ministry, October 15, 1936, *DGFP,* C, V, pp. 1,093-95.

[42] François-Poncet to Delbos, October 13, 20, 1936, *DDF,* 2, III, pp. 514, 577-82.

[43] See Chambrun to Delbos, October 17, 1936, *ibid.,* p. 560, and memo of Ciano conversation with von Neurath, October 21, 1936, in Malcolm Muggeridge, ed., *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers,* translated by Stuart Hood, (London: Odhams Press, 1948), p. 52.

[44] Emmett to Hull, October 19, 1936, *FR,* 1936, I, p. 361-62; Moermann memorandum, July 16, 1936, *DGFP,* C, V, p. 771.

[45] Emmett to Hull, July 20, 1937, *FR,* 1937, I, p. 111.

[46] See memoranda on van Zeeland conversations with Vansittart and Eden, November 27, 1936, *DDB,* IV, pp. 449-52.

[47] Gibbs, *Rearmament Policy,* p. 617.

[48] Entries of February 23 and March 23, 1937, in John Harvey, ed., *The Diplomatic Diaries of Oliver Harvey, 1937-1940* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970), pp. 15, 31.

[49] For the "most secret" memorandum see Ian Colvin, *The Chamberlain Cabinet: How the Meetings in 10 Downing Street, 1937-1939, Led to the Second World War — Told for the First Time from the Cabinet Papers* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1971), pp. 61-62. For the strategic importance of the Low Countries, see Gibbs, *Rearmament Policy,* p. 499.

[50] Foreign Ministry note of September 30, 1936, Annex III, *DDF,* 2, III, p. 441.

[51] Colvin, *The Chamberlain Cabinet,* pp. 61-62, 76.

[52] Gibbs, *Rearmament Policy,* p. 110.

[53] Entries of May 27 and September 15, 1939, in Harvey *Diaries,* pp. 292-93, 319.

[54] Memorandum for the Chief of Staff of U.S. Army Intelligence, entitled "The Present European Situation," by Asst. Chief of Staff E. R. W. McCabe, September 6, 1938, MID 2657-II-90/47.

[55] Minutes of Reich Chancellery Conference, November 5, 1937, in a memorandum dated November 10, *DGFP,* D, I, pp. 35-36.

[56] Bullitt to Hull, April 22, 1937, *FR,* 1937, I, p. 78.

[57] Brian Bond, *France and Belgium, 1939-1940* (London: David-Poynter, 1975), p. 25; Hughes, *To the Maginot Line,* pp. 201-2.

[58] Laroche to Delbos, November 16, 1936, *DDF,* 2, III, pp. 767-68; note of Delbos conversation with Kerchove, October 30, 1936, *ibid.,* pp. 593-94.

[59] Entries of April 24 and 25, 1938, in R. J. Minney, ed., *The Private Papers of Hore-Belisha* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), p. 120.

[60] Shirer, *Collapse of the Third Republic,* p. 331.

[61] Inskip's report set the following priority for a British military contribution: first, defense of the British Isles; second, defense of trade routes on which Britain depended for essential imports of food and raw materials; third, defense of British territories overseas; fourth, "co-operation in the defence of the territories of any allies we may have in war." Although these priorities were not communicated to other Western European nations, they must have been apparent in at least rough form. See Colvin, *The Chamberlain Cabinet,* p. 57.

[62] The confidential minute on the Belgian Guarantee Treaty of 1839, written in 1908 by Lord Hardinge, Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, may be found in Edward Hallet Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: Harper Torchbooks p.b., 1964), p. 183.