

THE BELGIAN ARMY
AND SOCIETY FROM
INDEPENDENCE TO
THE GREAT WAR



MARIO DRAPER



The Belgian Army and Society from Independence to the Great War

Mario Draper

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To my family

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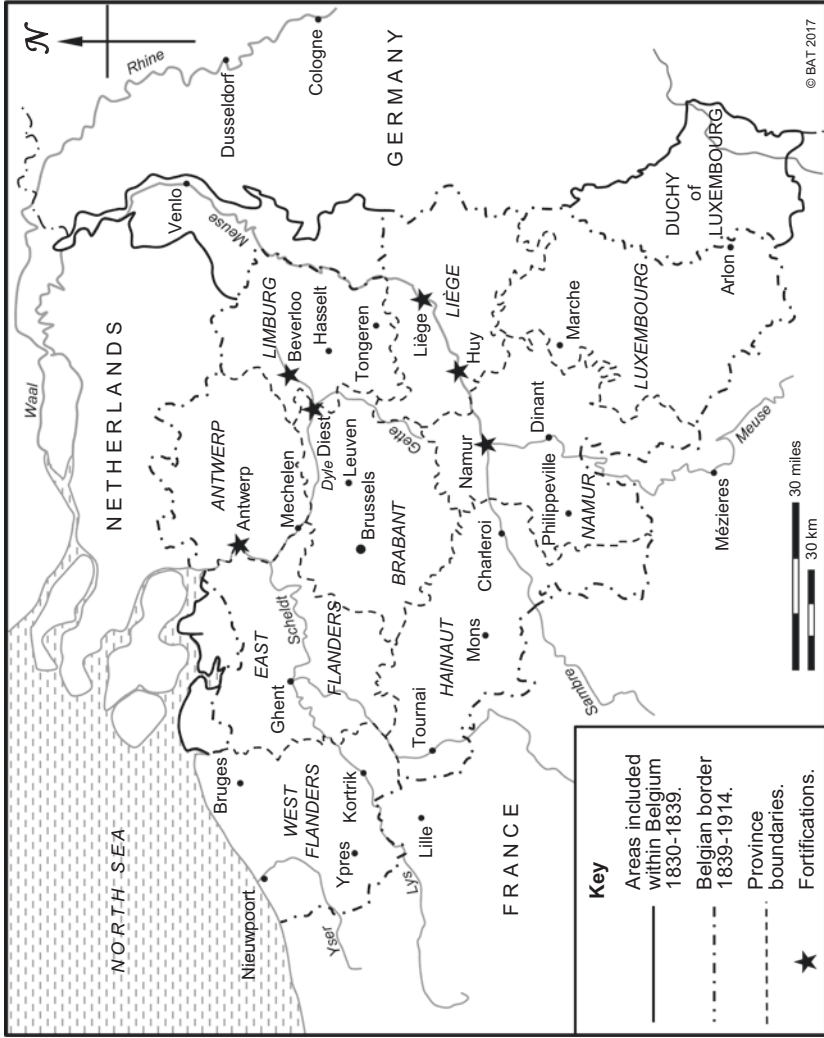
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Map of Belgium

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The spelling of place names has been chosen on the following basis for ease of understanding for a work in the English language. In the event that a place name has an accepted English equivalent, such as Brussels, this has been used instead of Brussel or Bruxelles. The Anglicised, Ghent, has been used as opposed to Gent. Similarly, the common usage of Ypres among English readers lends itself to the use of this spelling despite being the Gallicised version of Ieper.

Barring such exceptions, place names have been spelled in the dominant language of the region in which they are situated. For example, Mechelen is used as opposed to Malines because of its linguistic orientation towards Flemish, while Liège is used instead of Luik by the same logic due to its location in a predominantly French-speaking area. Throughout this has been done entirely at the author's discretion and by no means attempts to portray anything other than an understandable system for the Anglophone reader.

ABBREVIATIONS

AEA	Archives d'État d'Arlon
AER	Archives d'État du Royaume
AMB	Annuaire Militaire Belge
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
Comm 1866	Commission set up to examine whether the current organisation of the army responds to the necessities of national defence in 1866
Comm 1871	Verbal Proceeds of the Commission Instituted by Royal Decree of 18 April 1871 to study the questions related to the organisation of the army; published in 1873
DA	Division Armée
DMO	Director of Military Operations
GQG	Grand-Quartier-Général
IFFRC	In Flanders Fields Research Centre
JMO	Journal Militaire Officiel
KLM	Koninklijk Leger Museum
LIR	Line Infantry Regiment
MRA	Musée Royal de l'Armée
PPR	Parliamentary Proceedings: House of Representatives
RA	Royal Archives
RAK	Rijksarchief Kortrijk
Rec Comm. 1852	Verbal Proceeds of the 1852 Recruitment Committee
SHD	Sérvise Historique de Défense (Vincennes)
TNA	The National Archives (Kew)

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Introduction

This book asserts that the Belgian army was unsuccessful in its attempts to foster a unified national identity in a linguistically, culturally, and politically fractured society. The underlying reason for this was the unwarranted interference of party politics, which was too subservient to its small but powerful electorate that valued local and personal interests above those of the nation at large. A deep-rooted antimilitarism pervaded society at all levels, restricting the influence that the army could exert. In failing to overcome this aversion to a life under arms, and in many cases neglecting those forced to undertake service through the ballot, greater civil–military fissures appeared over the course of the nineteenth century. Similarly, the army found itself at the centre of a number of ostensibly social debates and contributed, in some respect, to the perpetuation of regional (linguistic), political, and cultural isolationism. The stoic way the army countered the German invasion in 1914 demonstrated a more complicated association between individuals and the concept of the nation. Despite the many obstacles, the vast majority of men from across the country found the resolve to defend independence through parallel (and sometimes competing) Belgian identities that were firmly rooted in parochialism.

The establishment of Belgian nationality has proven to be a difficult task for historians seeking to understand the dynamics behind the 1830 Revolution. Traditional views have focussed on the exploits of the Middle Ages as a starting point for the development of a national sentiment, which

ran alongside a long-established military tradition.¹ This was, of course, very important given the region's centrality to the wars of Europe. Resistance against the foreign occupier was a simple refrain for those desiring to uncover the roots of a common identity. The Brabant uprising against Austrian rule in 1789–1790 was a localised demonstration of this at the dawn of the age of nationalism, although it was the Revolution against Dutch rule in 1830 that historians have used as the genesis of the wider nation. Charles Terlinden, for example, argued that the Revolution of 1830 would not have succeeded without the persistence of a national consciousness among the masses, whose use of a tricolour as a symbol of unification ought not to go unnoticed.² This was corroborated by Émile Wanty in his seminal work on the Belgian Army; in it he noted the centrifugal force of the Brussels barricades in drawing together the revolutionary militias being raised ad hoc around the country. In total 80 communes were represented in the engagements in and around the capital.³

The importance of local aspects in the Revolution, and the subsequent establishment of a national identity, was highlighted in a colloquium on Belgian military history in Brussels in 1980. A variety of contributors examined the individual roles of Bruges, Liège, Ghent, Tournai, Brussels, and Antwerp in the struggle against Dutch forces as well as the interrelationship between them. It demonstrated the belief that the success of the Revolution was the sum of its constituent parts, which invoked the concept of a wider, all-encompassing, national movement.⁴ Yet, while drawing out cultural and religious commonalities that were diametrically opposed to Dutch rule, the local approach actually also demonstrated how unique responses to the Revolution were. Similar remarks can be made regarding

¹ J. Stengers, *Histoire du Sentiment National en Belgique des Origines à 1918*, Tome I: Les racines de la Belgique (Racine, Brussels, 2000); H. Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique des Origines à Nos Jours Vols. I–V* (La Renaissance du Livre, Brussels, 1972–1975).

² C. Terlinden, *Histoire Militaire des Belges* (La Renaissance du Livre, Brussels, 1931), pp. 255–257.

³ É. Wanty, *Le Milieu Militaire Belge de 1831 à 1914* (Palais des Académies, Brussels, 1957), p. 10.

⁴ R. Van Eenoo, '1830 te Brugge', pp. 29–53; R. Demoulin, 'La Révolution de 1830 à Liège', pp. 55–73; D. M. Balthazar, 'De Omwenteling van 1830 te Gent', pp. 75–103; J. Nazet, 'La Révolution de 1830 à Tournai', pp. 105–115; and J. Logie, 'La Révolution de 1830 à Bruxelles et à Namur', pp. 117–125, in *Actes du Colloque d'Histoire Militaire Belge (1830–1980)/Akten van het Colloquium over de Belgische Krijgsgeschiedenis (1830–1980)* (26–28 March 1980) (Musée Royal de l'Armée/Koninklijk Legersmuseum, Brussels, 1981).

the social groupings of the nation, whose motivations for participating, to a greater or lesser degree, varied according to circumstance.

In 2005 Els Witte contended that the only unifying factor among these disparate elements of the population was economic. By the late 1820s, the South Netherlands (i.e., Belgium) was being exploited as part of a protectionist policy defending the interests of the northern Protestants. The southern, largely Catholic, population contributed to 50% of the national debt despite being responsible for only 20% of it—a situation that affected all tiers of society. Only when faced with an economic crisis in 1829–1830, which resulted in high unemployment among artisans and labourers, were the conditions for revolution achieved. Other contributing factors, such as William I's decision to bring education under State control, much to the chagrin of the Catholic Clergy, similarly incited agitation, though not to the extent of provoking a wide-scale reaction.⁵ The concept of the nation-state requires society to come together on certain principles and accept the State's power and control. The building of Belgium was on a politico-ideological basis of liberalism that opposed despotic rule. Only through extensive dissemination of journalistic critiques under the specific circumstances that were present in 1830 was a political consciousness mobilised across social and geographical divides. This demonstrated how nationalism was not a vital ingredient in the development of the liberal Belgian State, which Witte argues still lacked a unified identity beyond the 1830s.⁶

Theoretical works on the study of nationalism have tended to emphasise the fluidity in the formation of, and association with, an identity. Marnix Beyen and Maarten Van Ginderachter note that '[i]dentification is not a zero-sum game where one identity supplants the other', rather that numerous, and often competing strands, allow individuals to identify with various groups at different times depending on the specific circumstances. The example used is that of Galicia where individuals considered themselves 'German' in opposition to, for example, their Czech coinhabitants, but otherwise professed profound regional ties that remained indifferent to strong nationalist pressure groups.⁷ Similar trends can be

⁵ E. Witte, *La Construction de la Belgique 1827–1847* (Éditions Complexe, Brussels, 2005), pp. 21–24 and 36–40.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 42–46 and 112–114.

⁷ M. Beyen and M. Van Ginderachter, 'General Introduction: Writing the Mass into a Mass Phenomenon' in M. Van Ginderachter and M. Beyen (eds.), *Nationhood from Below, Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2012), pp. 8–9.

observed in Belgium, where entrenched regionalism prevailed despite elite-led, State-driven attempts at constructing nationality through vehicles such as language. This was partly because the masses did not identify solely with these constructions, rather transforming, appropriating, or inverting them to form their own concept of the nation.⁸

In many ways, the Flemish sub-nation that emerged in Belgium reflected the model of ethnonationalism, which valued ‘natural’ communities based on race, biology, common descent, language, and culture. This was opposed to the civic-nationalism espoused by the State that encouraged citizens to choose to be a part of a nation based on a shared system of beliefs.⁹ Given the diversity of the population and its motivations during the 1830 Revolution, it cannot be considered ‘ethnic’ and required a move toward ‘civic’ factors in the aftermath to construct a unified national identity. As Van Ginderachter argues, however, no individual falls fully into one category.¹⁰ Therefore the *mélange* between the two poles can go some way to explaining why regional and national identities continued to clash in Belgium from independence to the Great War, and why the State felt continuously bound to promote ‘civic’ values that would draw the nation together.

In language and the army, the State believed it had a ready-made conveyance for nationalism. Following the idea of the French Revolutionary armies, the ability to inculcate a large cross-section of the nation’s youth with shared experiences, education, and values while under arms, and being commanded in a single language, was seen as the best method of breaking regional bonds in favour of a national identity.¹¹ The idea that the army, through its system of national recruitment, was a ‘melting-pot’ from which a greater homogeneity might emerge, formed the basis of an article by Richard Boijen. In it, he established that a process of ‘Frenchification’ characterised the early years to the point where Flemings,

⁸ Ibid., pp. 7–8.

⁹ M. Van Ginderachter, ‘How useful is the concept of ethnolinguistic nationalism? On imagined communities, the ethnic-civic dichotomy and banal nationalism’, in P. Broomans et al. (eds.), *The Beloved Mother tongue: Ethnolinguistic Nationalism in Small Nations: Inventories and Reflections* (Peeters, Leuven, Paris & Dudley, MA, 2008), p. 5.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

¹¹ For the French example see, A. Forrest, ‘*La patrie en danger*: The French Revolution and the First *Levée en Masse*’ in D. Moran and A. Waldron (eds.), *The People in Arms: Military Myth and National Mobilisation Since the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006), pp. 25–30.

in both civilian and military life, accepted the position as second-rate citizens.¹² This was despite their proportion of the population out-numbering Wallonia's by two-to-one. It demonstrated an early degree of success in civic-nationalism, but was undermined by the awakening of the Flemish movement in the 1850s, which took on a much more aggressive ethnolinguistic character that grew in prominence over the course of the nineteenth century and that continues to this day.¹³

Other countries faced similar difficulties in the relationship between their armies and societies. As John Gooch and Douglas Porch have pointed out in their respective studies of the Italian and French armies, one way in which the authorities maintained the status quo in their favour during the nineteenth century was to utilise the citizen army as a tool to educate and transform society—even going as far as using it as the building block for a nation-state. For example, the countering of regional factionalism was at the heart of Manfredo Fanti's failed drive to foster a sense of *Italianità* into the newly formed Italian nation in the 1860s.¹⁴ In France, by contrast, conscription and the idea of a nation-in-arms largely succeeded in forging national unity, bringing together men from various regions and social backgrounds. This, coupled with the ritualistic call up of successive conscript classes, solidified the respect for civic duty and the national ideal across multiple generations.¹⁵

By contrast, Hew Strachan, Edward Spiers, and David French, in their respective studies of the British Army, concluded that the social exclusivity of the officer corps, in particular, helped keep the army apolitical.¹⁶ Indeed, Spiers wrote of how the purchase system 'buttressed the State by attracting officers from families whose status, privileges and possessions were already protected by the State itself', thus ensuring their allegiance.¹⁷ While it may be said that the elite chose to serve, in order to confirm

¹²R. Boijen, 'Het Leger als Smeltkroes van de Natie?', *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis* (1997), no. 3, pp. 55–70.

¹³For just one example, see K. D. Shelby, *Flemish Nationalism and the Great War: The Politics of Memory, Visual Culture and Commemoration* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014), pp. 219–220.

¹⁴J. Gooch, *Army, State and Society in Italy, 1870–1915* (Macmillan Press, Basingstoke, 1989), pp. 10 and 21.

¹⁵D. Porch, *The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871–1914* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981), pp. 32 and 204.

¹⁶H. Strachan, *The Politics of the British Army* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997), pp. 20–43.

¹⁷E. M. Spiers, *The Army and Society, 1815–1914* (Longman Group Ltd, London, 1980), p. 12.

their social status, the rank and file—obtained through voluntary recruitment—were often driven to a career in the army through desperation.¹⁸ In many ways the army reflected the society from which it was drawn. In contrast to its French counterpart, the British rank and file expected to be led by its social superiors, reinforcing the class structure of the nation. The evolving concept of a gentleman, in turn, promoted Christian values, which were implicit in *noblesse oblige* and the realisation of their paternalistic duty towards the other ranks.¹⁹ In some ways, this strengthened the relationship between officers and men despite the inherent social gulf between them, while conscription, as Gooch noted, often increased class distinction.²⁰

What this serves to highlight are some of the themes taken up by historians in their study of European armies during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Within this framework, the Belgian case is even more enlightening, having to deal with similar issues in a different, and quite restricted, context. Both the state and the army struggled to seamlessly unite the two factions that dominated society and divided the country in almost every walk of life. Imposed neutrality from 1839, a situation that no other European country was forced to deal with, not only hampered recruiting because of the antimilitarism it engendered, but also severely strained civil–military relations. Often caught in the middle was the monarch, who constitutionally was both Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the army. Commercial enterprise and rapid industrialisation created pressures as social mobility reverberated through the Belgian Army's reflective social, political, and regional orders. Even though the army was used to forge a state in Prussia, to create a nation in Italy, and to sustain the status quo in France and Britain, the Belgian Army was merely a political battleground until the preconditions of war in 1914 allowed for these to be temporarily overcome.

Belgium is rarely studied outside of its own borders—much to the detriment of European history in general. For this small state, with its

¹⁸ D. French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, and the British People, c.1870–2000* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005), p. 37. For a contrary view, see N. Mansfield, *Soldiers as Workers: Class, Employment, Conflict and the Nineteenth-Century Military* (Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2016).

¹⁹ E. M. Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army, 1868–1902* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1992), p. 113.

²⁰ J. Gooch, *Armies in Europe* (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1980), pp. 127–128.

social, political, and linguistic peculiarities, has much to offer to a wider understanding of nation-building. It was, and still is, the centre of European internationalism, a focal point for ideas to flow both in and out of its cultural and intellectual centres.²¹ Yet, at least within Anglophone historiography, it is only just beginning to make a marked resurgence. For a long time, Sophie De Schaepdrijver and Martin Conway appeared to carry the flag by themselves, but a new wave of historians (some still at doctoral level) has emerged to demonstrate how a study of its institutions, the army in particular, is not a futile examination of a negligible power.²² Indeed, building on the seminal works of Émile Wanty and Luc De Vos in Belgium, the likes of Josephine Hoegaerts and Nel de Mûlenaere are challenging existing interpretations of the nineteenth-century army and its role within Belgian society.²³ It was, as they say, ‘one of the largest employers in the country, and a pedagogical institute for the lower classes’, making it both a space in which to develop the individual citizen and a force through which to cultivate the militarisation and patriotism of society.²⁴ This book aims to build on these foundations and explore the nature of

²¹ See D. Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium, 1880–1930: Peace, Progress and Prestige* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2013).

²² De Schaepdrijver’s work has tended towards, though not exclusively confined to, the experience of occupied Belgium during the First World War, while Conway’s has examined Belgium’s democratic and religious institutions during the twentieth century. For a select example in the English language, see S. De Schaepdrijver, *Elites for the Capital?: Foreign Migration to Mid-Nineteenth Century Brussels* (Amsterdam, 1990); *Bastion Bruges: Occupied Bruges in the First World War* (Hannibal Publishing, Veurne, 2014). See also, M. Conway, ‘Building the Christian city: Catholics and politics in interwar Francophone Belgium’, *Past and Present*, vol. 128 (1990), pp. 117–151; *Collaboration in Belgium: Léon Degrelle and the Rexist Movement, 1940–1944* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1993); *The Sorrows of Belgium: Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944–1947* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012).

²³ For the former, see Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*; L. De Vos, *Het Effectief van de Belgische Krijgsmacht en de Militiewetgeving, 1830–1914* (Brussels, 1985).

²⁴ N. de Mûlenaere and J. Hoegaerts, ‘Country and Army in the making: The Belgian military in the long nineteenth century’, *Journal of Belgian History*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2016), p. 18. For a full historiographical review of the Belgian Army, see the full article on pp. 10–20. See also, J. Hoegaerts, *Masculinity and Nationhood, 1830–1910: Constructions of Identity and Citizenship in Belgium* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014); N. de Mûlenaere, ‘An uphill battle: Campaigning for the militarization of Belgium, 1870–1914’, *Journal of Belgian History*, vol. 42, no. 4 (2012), pp. 144–179; ‘Belgen zijn gij ten strijde gereed? Militariseren een neutral natie, 1890–1914’ (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Antwerp, 2016).

the army as a social and military institution in the emergence of a Belgian national identity.

Chapter 2 provides the first of two chronological bookends by examining the establishment and role of the armed forces in Belgium during the turbulent 1830s. The Revolution was won on the barricades in the autumn of 1830, but continued independence was guaranteed only with the signing of the Treaty of London in 1839. In the intervening period, both the Civic Guard—Belgium’s part-time bourgeois force—and the regular army, had to contend with external and internal threats to the nascent State. The Dutch invasion during the Ten Days’ Campaign in August 1831, just days after Leopold I ascended the Belgian throne, proved the extent to which the army was, as yet, ill-suited to its primary task. Indeed, only with the help of French forces were the Dutch expelled from Belgian soil. Along with several exiled Polish officers, who themselves had lost their liberal revolution against the Russians in 1830–1831, French officers added much-needed experience to the Belgian Army’s ranks. In doing so, however, they inadvertently contributed to the growing sense of disillusionment among some Belgian nationals who aligned themselves with the Orangist movement to restore King William to the throne. This internal threat—the counterrevolution—required the efforts of the entire military establishment to subdue. Although it did have roots among the nobility, industrial bourgeoisie, and some senior officers, Orangism struggled to mobilise working-class support. The majority of the army and the Civic Guard demonstrated exceptional loyalty to the Belgian state during this time and were instrumental in safeguarding the nation through their patriotism and zeal. As the army grew in strength as an institution, Orangism waned.

Chapter 3 discusses the professionalisation of the officer corps from its establishment in 1830 until the outbreak of the First World War. This process was affected by several external factors, including a large influx of foreign officers, political interference, and institutional failings that all contributed towards undermining efficiency and morale. Obstacles for Flemish-speakers, in a predominantly Francophone officer corps, resulted in an alteration of the linguistic profile towards bilingualism that reflected the trend among Flanders’ middle-class society. This was reinforced by the army’s educational institutions, the *École Militaire* and *École de Guerre*, that sought to produce an homogenous group of officers through a standardised curriculum taught in French. Although the influence of these establishments became increasingly prominent, the military values and

professionalism they inculcated eroded over time as slow promotion rates in a neutral army forced many ambitious officers to seek alternative careers. Thus, by 1914, the officer corps lacked the martial spirit and identity it had fought to create after the Revolution.

The fourth chapter analyses the politics behind the recruitment of the rank and file, and its attempts to act as a unifying force among a divided population. Despite national recruitment, the ballot system helped to entrench a deep-rooted antimilitarism within society through the injustices of replacement, which actually drove the army and society farther apart. The power of local interests and of the electorate emerged as successive governments (both Catholics and Liberals) were held to account over the extension of military service, much to the detriment of military efficiency. This was to be a recurring theme until a series of reforms between 1902 and 1913 saw the system altered to include periods of volunteerism (1902), partial conscription through a one-son-per-family system (1909), and universal conscription (1913). These changes occurred too late to have an impact on the army's capabilities, and demonstrated the damaging effects of regionalism on military affairs through politics; this undermined any attempts to forge a shared national identity. Parochialisms were to be supplanted by national ideals while under arms in the 'school of the nation', a discussion of which runs through this chapter. Nevertheless, the army neglected its task of providing physical, moral, and educational supports for the nation's youth entrusted to its care. This was seen to be the corollary of military service, eventually leading to greater rights as citizens; however, the army and State defaulted on their side of the unwritten social contract. Deplorable conditions as well as religious and linguistic discrimination did nothing to endear the idea of nationhood to the majority of recruits forced into military service. As most soldiers hailed from the pious, rural heartlands of Flanders, the seemingly immoral institution further alienated sections of Belgium's antimilitaristic society. It explains the reasons why the Catholic Party, with its electoral base in these regions, came to dominate politics in the latter nineteenth century with policies specifically aimed at reducing the military charge.

Chapter 5 examines the changing nature of bourgeois militarism in the auxiliary forces between 1830 and 1914. The exclusivity of the Civic Guard, the theoretical guardians of the Revolution, engaged the middle classes in the military establishment that they had so tirelessly sought to avoid. Except for the threat posed to their position in 1848, participation

was marred with a similar apathy that initiated its decline. By the time internal order was threatened by the rise of socialism during the 1880s, and for the battle to extend the franchise in the 1900s, the composition of the Civic Guard had been reduced to urban centres, with the effect of undermining its military efficiency and its political reliability. Shared Liberal values and anticlerical sentiment among the urban *bourgeoisie* undermined the force's ability to be used effectively as an aid to civil power or as a military auxiliary. This role was subsequently adopted by the Gendarmerie, whose professionalism, apolitical nature, and military performance in policing internal unrest saw it usurp the Civic Guard as the primary State bulwark against the International.

The way the entire military establishment was to come together in Belgian strategy had to be assimilated with the nation's fortress policy, which is analysed in Chap. 6. The primary consideration of how best to adhere to international obligations as a neutral saw the military authorities agree on a show of arms through a concentration of force. To achieve this, many peripheral fortifications were dismantled while those of Antwerp were converted into a national redoubt from 1859, upon which the army would fall in the event of invasion to await succour from a guarantor power. Developments in artillery and European geopolitics, however, soon reduced its significance; this forced a redevelopment of the Meuse fortresses of Liège and Namur along a more likely future invasion route. Societal concerns over increases in military expenditure, once again, saw the issue of national defence take on a local character with a resulting political storm. Antimilitarism forced the government to delay vital additions to the defensive system, as well as to promise not to increase the annual contingent despite its obvious necessity. Similarly, given the money spent on Antwerp (1859 and 1906) and the Meuse (1887), it was impossible not to adhere to the principles of a concentration of force in front of Antwerp despite an evolution in strategic ideas in the decade preceding the outbreak of war.

Chapter 7 examines how the issues in the previous five chapters played out in a wartime context. Operationally, the First World War exposed many of the organisational failings of Belgium's nineteenth century military system that had taken too long to reform. Nevertheless, the stoic defence of the Meuse, Antwerp, and the Yser in 1914 demonstrated a unity of action among its divided composite parts that revealed something akin to nationalism. Parallel concepts of what it meant to be

Belgian emerged that allowed a poorly resourced and badly beaten army to endure the travails of a war that not only overran their hearths and homes but also threatened the nation's continued independence. This was exemplified in the March 1918 strikes by Flemish soldiers, in which they campaigned for linguistic parity within the concept of a wider Belgian nation. Rather than mutiny, they continued to soldier to rid the country of 'the other' against which they, and the rest of the army, came to define themselves. This demonstrated that the crisis of 1914–1918 allowed concurrent affiliations to the concept of nationhood to flourish that were otherwise stifled in peacetime.

Securing the Nation

From the moment the Provisional Government declared independence on 4 October 1830 until the Treaty of London of 1839 ended the war with the Netherlands, the future of the nascent Belgian State was anything but secure. Externally, Dutch aggression, which in August 1831 resulted in an invasion, continuously threatened the country's existence. Internally, the threat of the counterrevolution remained an unedifying spectre with which the Belgian authorities had to contend until 1841. Both required action to consolidate what the revolutionary fighters of the Civic Guard had won in 1830. Nonetheless the citizen force, though still in existence, was wholly inadequate to perform this task alone and required the support from a more regular army. Together, this *Force Publique* played a leading role in the events of the 1830s. Despite often found wanting in martial capacity and, at times, loyalty, the armed forces grew alongside the social and political developments to become a pillar of stability. Better organised and increasingly prominent, the military establishment proved to be a dependable institution that played a key role in securing the Belgian nation.

To some, Belgium did not appear a viable state. The closure of Dutch markets threatened to undermine the consolidation process of the region's industrial revolution, which, in 1830, was second only to that of Britain.¹

¹ A. R. Zolberg, 'The making of Flemings and Walloons: Belgium, 1830–1914', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1974), pp. 194–195.

For the ‘old’ aristocracy and the industrial bourgeoisie of the manufacturing centres of Ghent, Liège, and the wider industrial heartlands of Hainaut, the new regime threatened to usher in an era of costly uncertainty.² For those whose political and business interests stood to suffer, immediate action was required. While William I kept his armies mobilised for an invasion, powerful individuals within Belgium worked tirelessly to retain old, and forge new, political and economic links with neighbouring powers. The Reunionist and Orangist movements (seeking union with France and the Netherlands, respectively) contained authoritative figures who used their influence to undermine the new state from within.³ Although the former largely disappeared as a pressure group by 1832, Orangism, and the counterrevolution, remained a continuous danger throughout the 1830s. Only with time and the establishment of a stable political, economic, and military structure was the idealised conceptualisation of the Revolution’s ‘intellectual elite’ consolidated beyond the reach of a Dutch restoration.

The formation of a centre helped in this respect. Brussels not only became the capital but also, as Els Witte has observed, ‘the expression of a system of values that reinforce[d] the idea of the nation’.⁴ With its architectural projections of power through buildings, such as the *Palais de la Nation* (the seat of Parliament), and its spacial resonance in popular memory as the site of revolutionary victory, Brussels offered a focal point where constitutional liberalism could flourish.⁵ In comparison to other Catholic European countries (e.g., France, Italy, and Spain), Belgium adapted well to the liberal environment of the age, while retaining its conservative institutions.⁶ Militant anticlericalism was not as prevalent as elsewhere, allowing for the consolidation of Church and State. The Catholic Church had

²S. Clark, ‘Nobility, bourgeoisie and the industrial revolution in Belgium’, *Past and Present*, no. 105 (1994), pp. 162–163.

³J. Stengers, ‘Sentiment national, sentiment orangiste et sentiment français à l’aube de notre indépendance’, *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire*, vol. 28, no. 3 (1950), pp. 993–1029; and vol. 29, no. 1 (1951), pp. 61–92.

⁴E. Witte, ‘The formation of a centre in Belgium: The role of Brussels in the formative stage of the Belgian State (1830–40)’, *European History Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1989), p. 436.

⁵For more on the spacial, architectural, and sonorous construction of Belgian nationality, see J. Hoegaerts, *Masculinity and Nationhood, 1830–1910: Constructions of Identity and Citizenship in Belgium* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014).

⁶V. Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See from Gregory XVI to Pius IX (1831–1859) Catholic Revival, Society and Politics in 19th-Century Europe* (Institut Historique Belge de Rome, Brussels & Rome, 2001), p. 10.

been influential in mobilising popular support for the Revolution and was eager to cooperate with liberals to regain a position of influence within society. Its links with the State were confirmed with the accession of Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to the throne in 1831, despite his Lutheran upbringing. Recognising the importance of Catholicism in promoting virtues of authority, discipline, and obedience, the new constitutional monarch proved incredibly amenable to a close link between these two pillars of the nation.⁷ As far as Leopold I was concerned, it kept the revolutionary radicals at bay and safeguarded the conservative institutions essential to stable and effective rule.

When King Leopold I took command of his army ahead of the Ten Days' Campaign (2–12 August 1831), however, he found that the other crucial component to securing the nation was in a deplorable state. Blinded by the successes of 1830, which had forced the remaining Dutch troops to seek refuge in the Antwerp Citadel, the Provisional Government had immediately sought reductions in military expenditure. It released the ably trained 1826 class from service, while shortages in equipment and ammunition undermined the army's fighting capabilities. Additionally, too much confidence was placed in the Civic Guard whose martial spirit had already begun to wane following the armistice of 17 November 1830.⁸ Indiscipline was rife. It had already proven to be an issue in September's fighting and was not helped by the increasingly large numbers of inexperienced volunteers flocking to the Revolutionary scene. In many ways the army exemplified the disorganisation at the War Committee (later the Ministry of War), the portfolio of which changed hands on no fewer than four occasions in the 10 months preceding the Dutch invasion. Under these conditions, the establishment of a permanent military structure proved challenging. General Tiecken de Terhove's report from December 1830 was indicative. In it, he described how the forces in Limburg and Liège were not only poorly equipped and trained but also lacked experienced officers. The Army of the Meuse, moreover, had no cavalry and only one infantry battalion capable of taking to the field immediately, with the others described as 'reduced to a state of uselessness'.⁹

⁷ Witte, 'The formation', p. 442; Viaene, *Belgium*, pp. 150–153.

⁸ C. Terlinden, *Documents inédits sur la participation de la garde civique de Bruxelles à la campagne des "Dix jours" (2–12 août 1831)* (Palais des Académies, Brussels, 1963), p. 69.

⁹ J. R. Leconte, *Le Général Daine a-t-il trahi en 1831?* (L'Avenir, Brussels, 1938), pp. 46–47.

Attempts to rectify the situation had already begun. On 27 October 1830 the Provisional Government reorganised the old Dutch *Afdeelingen* as the basis for its own regular army. They incorporated as many officers and men of the Royal Army as would come and raised numbers in the rank and file through national recruitment drives.¹⁰ By 6 November measures were undertaken to create recognisable regiments formed of a command structure, three battalions of six companies each, as well as a depot force. It was along these lines that the first nine Line Infantry Regiments (LIR) were raised with a combined strength of 32,000 regulars. Noncommissioned officers (NCOs) were drawn, as much as possible, from men with experience. General Nypels, appointed Commander-in-Chief on 5 October, favoured those from the old French Imperial Army for this purpose. These regiments were supported by 6,000 remaining volunteers, who were formally incorporated into the regular army on 30 March 1831 in recognition of their contribution to the Revolution. It also relieved the authorities of a perpetual headache.¹¹ This included the commissioning of volunteer officers, much to the chagrin of the returning professionals who felt their career prospects threatened. Demoralisation and resentment simmered beneath the surface and created the conditions for a strike against the establishment from within.

When the first major threat to the Belgian State emerged during the counterrevolutionary movement in the spring of 1831, neither the army nor the Civic Guard remained unequivocally loyal to the Provisional Government. Plans to restore the House of Orange-Nassau under the popular Prince Frederick were laid in Ghent and Antwerp where it was confirmed by the Orangist upper-bourgeoisie that many officers were prepared to offer their services.¹² The reasons for this were manifold. Some had been reluctant to leave Dutch service in the first place, but found their prospects diminished when, in mid-October, the Prince of Orange refused to lead a southern-filled army on Brussels. Others bided

¹⁰For more on the Dutch Army, see H. Amersfoort, 'De strijd om het leger (1813–1840)', in C. A. Tamse and E. Witte (eds.), *Staats- en Natievorming in Willem I's Koninkrijk (1815–1830)* (Vubpress, Brussels, 1992), pp. 186–206.

¹¹L.A. Leclier, *L'Infanterie: Filiations et Traditions* (Brussels, 1973), pp. 30–31; E. Witte, *La Construction de la Belgique, 1828–1847* (Éditions Complexe, Brussels, 2005), p. 65; Leconte, *Le Général Daine*, pp. 38–40. This established the 12th LIR as well as the 2nd and 3rd Chasseurs à Pied.

¹²E. Witte, *Le Royaume perdu: Les orangistes belges contre la révolution 1828–1850* (Samsa s.p.r.l, Brussels, 2014), pp. 197–198.

their time until the *Comité Central* issued a ruling in November that all soldiers of the Royal Army were to be incorporated into the Belgian Army or else be considered as hostile. Hesitancy proved costly. Those who answered the Provisional Government's call on 4 October, which released officers from their Dutch oaths, were rewarded with immediate promotion. Late arrivals faced the humiliating prospect of serving under former subordinates and were unable to shake the image of counterrevolutionaries. This created an officer corps beset by resentment and suspicion that ran both ways. Career officers, disdainful of their overpromoted volunteer counterparts, tussled with one another for rank and influence, while loyalties were constantly brought into question. Unable to fall back on a shared military heritage and tradition, frustration rapidly descended into dysfunctionality.¹³ Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that many of those arriving from Dutch service yearned for a return of the old order and became embroiled in the counterrevolutionary movement.

While the National Congress deliberated over the best method of legitimising the Revolution within the confines of European acceptability, Dutch preparations for reunification continued apace. The Prince of Orange could rightly feel confident of garnering enough international and local support to claim the throne of an independent region, which would retain durable links with the north. Both Britain and France appeared to favour this solution to the issue of Belgian sovereignty as it would appease the Russian Tsar, whose sister was married to Prince Frederick. Orangist deputies similarly encouraged this motion in the National Congress but faced a wall of opposition, primarily from the aggressive politicking of republicans who saw, in the Revolution, an opportunity to abolish hereditary monarchy in the region once and for all.¹⁴ Anti-Orangist sentiments had reached fever-pitch among moderate liberals, Francophiles, and republicans following the bloodshed in Brussels during the September skirmishes. The bombardment of Antwerp by Dutch forces in the Citadel on 24 October, as they tried to break the revolutionaries' siege, only sharpened sensibilities. It severely undermined the credibility of the Orange-Nassau dynasty, whose restoration, although largely beaten in the National

¹³É. Wanty, *Le Milieu Militaire Belge de 1831 à 1914* (Palais des Académies, Brussels, 1957), p. 32.

¹⁴Witte, *Royaume perdu*, p. 181.

Congress by December 1830, was dealt a further blow in January 1831 by the decision to offer the throne to the Duke de Nemours, King Louis-Philippe of France's son.¹⁵ Lord Palmerston, keen to find a Belgian solution to the problem, though wary of foreign influence, could not countenance such a proposal.¹⁶ Consequently, despite receiving general approbation when put to a vote on 3 February 1831, King Louis-Philippe rejected the crown on behalf of his son, leaving the National Congress with no other short-term option to block an Orangist restoration than to approve the appointment of a regent in the form of Erasme Louis Surlet de Chockier later that month.

In response to these debates, the first stroke of the counterrevolution occurred in Ghent on 2 February 1831, with further action set to follow in Antwerp and Liège in March. Despite being told that Dutch military intervention was impossible for fear of provoking a French reaction, senior officers, such as General Duvivier and Colonel L'Olivier, were prepared to act. The signal was to be Colonel Grégoire's arrival from Bruges with his *Tirailleurs* and a letter of support from the Prince of Orange to rouse the populace to their cause. Secret planning had clearly been going on for weeks, with the *Commandant de la Place de Bruges* noting suspicious activity between Grégoire and General De Mahieu.¹⁷ Officers of the 3rd and 4th (LIRs) in Antwerp were more open in their support for a restoration; among them General Baron Jacques Vandersmissen de Cortenberg and General Nypels. Mechelen's garrison, unsurprisingly given its location in Orangist Limburg, was able to count on support from Lieutenant Colonel Edeline of the 1st Lancers, while the Army of Campine contained Colonel Kénor and Major Kessels (both of whom owed their careers to the Provisional Government, but were so disenchanted as to throw their weight behind the counterrevolution).¹⁸

Liège was slightly late to mobilise for the counterrevolution because of political fractiousness though, once it did, became a strong centre of Orangism having prospered under Dutch rule. A keen supporter of the

¹⁵ Stengers suggested that '[t]he September days founded national independence. The bombardment of Antwerp would condemn the Nassau dynasty'. See, 'Sentiment national', vol. 28, no. 3 (1950), p. 1003.

¹⁶ G. Newton, *The Netherlands: An Historical and Cultural Survey 1795–1977* (Ernest Benn, London, 1978), p. 56.

¹⁷ AER POS. 2116/9, Vander Linden Papers, Dedobbelart to Goblet d'Alviella, 2 February 1831.

¹⁸ Witte, *Royaume perdu*, p. 213.

restoration was John Cockerill, whose steel-making and machine empire, established in 1817, had been a catalyst for an economic and population boom.¹⁹ With firms, such as Cockerill's, prepared to provide arms to the movement, there was a chance that the Walloon contribution might prove decisive if only the army could be mobilised by the controversial General Nicolas Joseph Daine. At 49 years of age, Daine had served in the French Army from 1795 to 1813 and with the Dutch from 1813 to 1830, attaining the rank of Brigadier-General. Having sold out to the revolutionaries at Venlo in September 1830, his loyalty was known to be for sale—not least due to his tendency to run up enormous debts, which William I had cleared on two previous occasions. Given the level of support within the army across the country, including the Commander-in-Chief of the Civic Guard and the former Minister of War, General Albert Goblet d'Alviella, the counterrevolutionaries remained confident that the time was right to act. Despite harbouring some reservations, they were confident that, once in motion, all the elements would fall into place.²⁰

Nevertheless, Els Witte's detailed work on the Orangist movement revealed grievous organisational failings that weakened the counterrevolution from within.²¹ Unsure of whether they were fighting to restore William I or the Prince of Orange, the plans laid down across the country's urban centres never got off the ground. The opening moves in Ghent in early February were compromised by a lack of cooperation from the Governor and its garrison, resulting in the imprisonment of its leader, Ernest Grégoire, along with 18 officers. The second stroke, planned for Antwerp and Liège at the end of March, was scuppered by unforeseen delays. Vandersmissen and Nypels were to empty the former of its garrison and march on Brussels, while Liège's workers were to claim the city before following Daine and the Army of the Meuse to the capital.

Vandersmissen's enthusiasm in recruiting officers for the restoration proved to be his, and the Antwerp movement's, undoing after being exposed by loyal elements. All the conspirators were arrested save for Vandersmissen who escaped to Prussia, only to return a decade later for

¹⁹ Seraing's population soared from 2,000 to 40,000 during the nineteenth century. I. Devos and T. Van Rossem, 'Urban health penalties: Estimates of life expectancies in Belgian cities, 1846–1910', *Journal of Belgian History*, vol. 45, no. 4 (2015), p. 79.

²⁰ Witte, *Royaume perdu*, pp. 45–46 and 214–217.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 223–224.

Orangism's last flourish. Meanwhile, events in Liège owed their postponement to Daine, who refused to commit to action while he haggled for money. Consequently, the British diplomat, Henry Lord Ponsonby, an Orangist sympathiser, counselled against immediate action. The effect was to destabilise the preparations in Brussels itself, where J. Vanderlinden d'Hoogvoorst and his brother Emmanuel, Commander in Chief of the Civic Guard, had prepared to receive both forces. This was not without consequence given the Civic Guard's eventual refusal to act with the counterrevolutionaries. In fact, the force demonstrated exceptional loyalty to the state by preventing Orangist troops from entering the capital.²²

The aftermath was unsurprisingly brutal. The failure to mobilise the working classes led to much harassment of known Orangists and their properties in the name of patriotism. Songs, banners, and other identifications with the Revolution were a common sight among the mobs who attacked the editors and premises of Orangist newspapers in Liège, Antwerp, and Ghent. In particular, the influential *Messenger de Gand* was targeted. Amid the chaos, the forces of order were only as effective as the governors deploying them, with many being accused of not intervening swiftly enough. The response from the army was, at times, even more extreme. General Tiecken de Terhove, for example, purposefully prevented his men from restoring order, thereby tacitly participating in the retribution. Meanwhile, in Brussels, de Chasteler's volunteers were allowed to partake in the destruction providing they refrained from arson, an act that soldiers in Ypres appeared unable to resist.²³ Such scenes were not confined to 1831. 'Public justice' was repeated in 1834. It demonstrated the growing strength of the working class' embryonic patriotism, which, apart from a few dissidents in the officer corps, was also reflected in the army.²⁴

For the officers implicated, there followed a period of interrogations by the Military High Courts to determine the extent of their involvement and the identities of fellow conspirators. Although existing reports confirmed the significant involvement of Colonel Borremans, Major Kessels, General Nypels, and Lieutenant-Colonel Edeline, only the former was

²² Ibid., pp. 219–223.

²³ Ibid., pp. 230–231.

²⁴ Stengers, 'Sentiment national', vol. 28, no. 3 (1950), p. 995.

sentenced to five years imprisonment and dismissed from the army.²⁵ Indeed, a general pardon was granted, though Vandersmissen and Nypels were replaced in their positions. Caution being the better part of valour, a policy of reconciliation was implemented for two reasons. First, it was hoped that, by granting clemency, the comparatively small number of officers with Orangist links would become increasingly tied to the new state in which they still retained positions of influence. Second, the fledgling army could not afford to lose experienced officers while the possibility of war remained. Some Orangist sympathisers attempted to return to Dutch service on condition of retaining their rank; however, they were refused permission by The Hague who saw more benefit in keeping them ensconced within the Belgian military system. It was recognised that any vacancies caused by their departure would soon be filled by officers more favourable to the government.²⁶ Consequently, the army that countered the Dutch invasion on 2 August 1831 retained a number of officers of questionable loyalty, which, in many ways, proved damaging to the conduct of the Belgian campaign.

At the crucial moment of the consolidation of power, the ascension of King Leopold I to the Belgian throne on 21 July 1831 threatened to undo much of the Provisional Government's work by moving towards a more conservative Orleanist-style regime. He had become the obvious candidate following the British opposition to the Duke de Nemours, but was very much a product of his *ancien régime* upbringing. The new monarch disliked parliamentary systems that checked the powers of kings, but conceded that the best he could hope for was to exercise the role of arbiter over Unionist governments (comprised of Catholics and Liberals).²⁷ Nevertheless, constitutionally he was Commander-in-Chief of the army during times of war—a role he actively took up sooner than expected. Leopold I already had connections in London, having married the heiress to the British throne, Princess Charlotte in 1816. Her sudden death in 1817, however, dashed his prospects of a royal career, leaving Leopold's niece, Victoria to succeed King William IV in 1837. Indeed, once it was

²⁵ AER POS. 2116/9, Vander Linden Papers, Minister of Justice, Barthélémy to Surlet de Chockier, 7 April 1831.

²⁶ Witte, *Royaume perdu*, p. 303.

²⁷ E. Witte, *Le Moniteur Belge, Le Gouvernement et le Parlement Pendant l'Unionisme (1831–1845)* (Ministère de la Justice. Moniteur Belge, Brussels, 1985), p. 21; Viaene, *Belgium*, pp. 153–155.

clear that the National Congress had rejected the restoration of the Prince of Orange, Palmerston favoured a pro-Belgian policy within a British sphere of influence because of the significant British investment in the region's industry.²⁸ Unhappy with the British attitude and the preliminary discussions at the Conference of London, on 1 August 1831 King William I declared that, without refusing to continue negotiations, he was determined to press Dutch claims through military means. The following day, he invaded with an army of 80,000 men as Leopold I sojourned in Liège during his triumphant tour of the country's principal cities.²⁹

The Ten Days' Campaign caught the Belgian forces unprepared and were reduced to an effective strength of just 28,000 men. On paper, the army could muster somewhere between 40,000 and 48,000 men but found that many were on leave collecting the harvest. Others were simply raw recruits who had barely set foot on the parade ground let alone been trained for war.³⁰ This was the first of many obstacles the army faced in a war that turned out to be a military debacle. Leopold I returned to Brussels on 5 August before assuming personal command of operations, where his primary objective was to coordinate the junction between the Army of the Scheldt, under General Tiecken de Terhove, and the Army of the Meuse under General Daine. The former numbered approximately 15,600 men (though other sources suggest 400 officers and 9,000 men) and was intended for Daine's command until it was recognised that a man suspected of Orangism would not be welcome among a largely hostile Antwerp population. The Army of the Meuse was slightly smaller at 450 officers and 12,000 men and was adjudged to be 2,000–3,000 men, four to six cavalry squadrons, and three artillery batteries understrength.³¹ In July, both forces were thinly spread across comparatively wide fronts approximately 60 kilometres apart. The Army of the Meuse was scattered over an area of 75 kilometres in length from Hasselt to Venlo and a depth of 50 kilometres from Beeringen to Visé—a distance that took two days of forced marches in order to assemble around Hasselt. The Army of the Scheldt was similarly dispersed around the outskirts of Antwerp, with its headquarters at Schilde. Given these dispositions, which offered a direct

²⁸ Newton, *The Netherlands*, pp. 56–57.

²⁹ Terlinden, *Documents inédits*, p. 68.

³⁰ Ibid., 69; Leconte, *Le Général Daine*, p. 43.

³¹ MRA Fonds Belgique en Période 1830–1839 (hereafter Belgium 1830–1839), 11/2/13; Report by Tiecken de Terhove to De Failly, 4 August 1831; Leconte, *Le Général Daine*, pp. 48–50.

and unopposed route to Brussels, the strategic importance of unifying the two armies was evident.

The Dutch, too, were aware of the situation. A quick resolution to the campaign obviously hinged on taking Brussels, leading to a plan of action designed to keep the two Belgian armies apart in order to defeat them in detail. While the Army of the Scheldt bore the initial shock in fighting around Turnhout, the Army of the Meuse was directed towards the strategic lynchpin of Diest, a small town to the northeast of Brussels. Daine had ordered the 10th (LIR) to defend Diest but found that its commanding officer, Colonel Boucher, had instead retreated to Hasselt, allowing Dutch forces to invest the strongpoint and cut off the route along which the Army of the Meuse was directed to form its junction. Orders and counterorders poured in from Antwerp, from where a floundering Minister of War, Amédée De Failly, was attempting to coordinate operations.

On 4 August, Daine received instructions both to move along the river Nethe to join Tiecken de Terhove, as well as to fortify Hasselt and move towards Hechtel, some 20 kilometres farther north in the opposite direction. With much subsequent criticism and accusations of treason, Daine followed the latter. By 6 August, his army had been pushed back to Houthalen, halfway between Hechtel and Hasselt, where it fought a defensive victory against General Cortheyliger's Dutch forces. Having learned of Dutch movements on Diest, Daine sought to concentrate his forces and attack the enemy's rear areas that had been left exposed. As a result of his forces being spread as far south as Tongeren, however, he found it impossible to assemble them quickly enough to deal a decisive blow and instead retreated on Zonhoven to await the arrival of reinforcements from Luxembourg, which had been promised since 3 August.³² Leopold I was incensed at Daine's flagrant disregard for orders. He subsequently was told to leave a covering force of Civic Guardsmen at Zonhoven and to direct the bulk of his army towards Diest. Victorious engagements at Herderen and Kermpt could not stem the flow of the campaign in Dutch favour, who entered St. Truiden on 7 August and began threatening the Army of the Meuse's flank. To avoid encirclement, Daine was forced to retreat towards Tongeren where he hoped to be reunited with Colonel Wuesten's forces but found that the latter had

³² MRA 11/2/14, Daine to De Failly, 3 August 1831 and 5 August 1831; *L'Indépendant*, 8 August 1831.

already abandoned the position, leaving a prospective counterattack out of the question.³³ The demoralised and battered Army of the Meuse was forced to retreat to Liège on 9 August, where Daine was faced with a crisis of command. Several officers formed a council under Colonel l'Olivier, protesting against Daine's leadership and suspecting him of treason. By contrast Daine claimed that Dutch gold had poisoned the spirit of his army against him and caused the military setbacks that had prevented him from linking up with the Army of the Scheldt.³⁴ This point will be returned to later but, needless to say, it all but ended the Army of the Meuse's role in the campaign.

Meanwhile, the Army of the Scheldt, marched on Diest on 7 August in an attempt to link up with Daine's beleaguered forces. The King's arrival had given it renewed impetus following the drain on morale after days of hard fighting, deprivation of food and sleep, and accusations of stale command under Tiecken de Terhove.³⁵ Following news of Daine's defeat, Leopold I moved his forces first to Aarschot and then on to Leuven as a protective screen to the east of Brussels. At Boutersem and Leuven, the remnants of the Belgian Army fought off Dutch forces with great vigour on 12 August; however, they were eventually forced to give way in the face of an overwhelming numerical superiority of 3:1. The King, sensing defeat, sent for the plenipotentiaries to conclude peace. Leuven was temporarily lost as the Army of the Scheldt withdrew towards Mechelen. A reorganised Army of the Meuse appeared at Tirlemont on 15 August only to find that hostilities had already ceased three days previously. The death toll on both sides was relatively meagre at 925 Belgian and 661 Dutch soldiers.³⁶ The political ramifications, though, extended well beyond that.

Brussels was not invested by Dutch forces though. The timely arrival of 50,000 French soldiers under Marshal Gérard was enough to force the withdrawal of the Prince of Orange's army back beyond Belgium's borders. Belgian officials were aware of the French concentration of forces at Givet and Maubege from 6 August but knew intervention had to be

³³ Ibid., Daine to De Failly, 5 August 1831; MRA 11/2/8, Orders given to the Army of the Meuse commanded by General Daine during the Campaign of August 1831; Leconte, *Le Général Daine*, pp. 57–65; Terlinden, *Documents inédits*, p. 69.

³⁴ MRA 11/2/10, Daine to Goethals, 9 August 1831; Leconte, *Le Général Daine*, pp. 66–68.

³⁵ Terlinden, *Documents inédits*, p. 70; Leconte, *Le Général Daine*, pp. 69–70.

³⁶ Witte, *La Construction de la Belgique*, p. 66.

carefully managed to ensure Britain did not misconstrue Louis-Philippe's intentions. Given the pressing nature of the situation, Leopold I had requested immediate French help and had contacted the British explaining that any delay in forming a coalition to intervene militarily might have the direst of consequences. Gérard's army was simply to cross the border with the sole intention of restoring tranquillity. Once the armistice and Belgian independence had been guaranteed, they were to return home.³⁷

British fears of an extension of French influence over the region were evident in Lord Palmerston's encounters with the Belgian diplomat and former member of the Provisional Government, Sylvain Van de Weyer. Less than a month after the cessation of hostilities, Sir Robert Adair, Palmerston's agent, despite his best efforts, had failed to obtain a categorical response concerning the suspension of arms, the evacuation of French troops, or the proposed demolition of certain fortifications deemed essential to the peace talks. Indeed, the prolonged stay of French forces was a source of contention among the opposition in the British Parliament who recognised that Dutch aggression was viewed as a blessing among the war party in Paris who might want to escalate the conflict to their own advantage.³⁸ Precautions, therefore, had to be taken, particularly given the appointment of a number of French officers to high-ranking positions in the Belgian Army and the absence of any timeframe for a French withdrawal while Dutch forces remained in the Antwerp Citadel and Maastricht.³⁹

Nevertheless, Belgian forces had been comprehensively beaten during the Ten Days' Campaign and were forced to sign the XXIV Articles of the Treaty of London in November 1831, renouncing their claims on Maastricht, Dutch Limburg, the non-Walloon portion of Luxembourg, and crucially both banks of the Scheldt estuary—the gateway to the port of Antwerp. A political crisis ensued as moderates and radicals argued over foreign policy, which eventually led to the downfall of the conciliatory

³⁷ MRA 11/2/10, Goethals to d'Hane-Steenhuysse, 8 August 1831; RA, Archives du Cabinet du Roi, Leopold I 221, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Report concerning the Financial Reimbursement of the French Expeditions in 1831 and 1832.

³⁸ For more on British opposition to French influence in Belgium and the related issue of the barrier fortresses in peace negotiations, see D. H. Thomas, *The Guarantee of Belgian Independence and Neutrality in European Diplomacy, 1830s–1930s* (Thomas Publishing, Kingston, RI, 1983), pp. 27–29.

³⁹ AER POS.2407/104, Van de Weyer Papers, Van de Weyer to Leopold I, 8 September 1831.

Félix de Mûelenaere in September 1832. The new independent Liberal, Goblet d'Alviella, supported by the eminent Charles Rogier, took office in October 1832 in the face of increasing pressure to expel the lingering Dutch garrison in the Antwerp Citadel.⁴⁰ Meanwhile William I, having refused to sign the XXIV Articles on the principle that it would recognise Belgium as an independent state, prepared another offensive to pressure Europe's diplomats to bend to his demands. Palmerston pressed the Dutch to accept the treaty throughout 1832 but, failing to make progress, agreed with the French to apply pressure of their own through an embargo on Dutch shipping and a blockade of its ports. This was backed up by a threat of French military action if Dutch forces were not withdrawn from Belgian soil by 15 November. Unwilling to yield, and hopeful that a war would turn in their favour, the besieged Dutch forces began to bombard Antwerp on 4 December 1832. Three weeks of fighting ensued. Still, the Belgian forces, which had dutifully aided the French in the siege and suffered significant deprivations and high rates of disease, were prohibited from taking part.⁴¹ With the aid of heavy artillery, and at a cost of 108 French lives, the Dutch forces, who themselves sustained almost 500 casualties, were dislodged from the Citadel on 23 December 1832, resulting in 4,845 others being taken prisoner.⁴²

It is interesting to note the extent of fraternisation between French and Dutch soldiers after the armistice was agreed, which sat in stark contrast to the bitter attitude between the latter and the Belgians. Military honour was clearly unable to transcend the political ill-will between the two peoples. This was demonstrated during the official disarming ceremony at which half a dozen Belgian officers were requested to leave by their French hosts at the behest of their indignant Dutch counterparts. In J. R. Leconte's view, this reaction vindicated the decision to distance Belgian soldiers from the main engagement as it might well have protracted the affair.⁴³

⁴⁰ Witte, *Le Moniteur Belge*, p. 68.

⁴¹ RA Archives du Cabinet du Roi, Leopold I 167, General Correspondence. Report from General Desprez, 12 August 1832.

⁴² Witte, *Royaume perdu*, pp. 330–336.

⁴³ J. R. Leconte, 'Notes sur l'épilogue du siège de la citadelle d'Anvers. Le sort des prisonniers hollandaise (1832–1833)', *Revue internationale d'histoire militaire*, vol. 20 (1959), pp. 592–594.

Despite Dutch remnants taking up entrenched positions in the forts of Lillo and Liefkenshoek to the northwest of Antwerp for several months, the signing of the Zonhoven Convention on 25 May 1833 brought the protracted campaign to a conclusion. Dutch forces finally withdrew from Belgium in return for Venlo, the exchange of prisoners, and the lifting of the embargo on Dutch commerce. Nevertheless, Belgian troops continued to occupy Luxembourg and parts of Dutch Limburg, which the XXIV Articles had assigned to The Netherlands.

The immediate postwar enquiry concerning the army's performance drew two conclusions. Subversion, although suspected, had not played a part in the final defeat, but a deficiency in suitably experienced officers had unquestionably been exposed. The Commission established on 16 August 1831 to look into Daine's conduct during the campaign was unable to provide enough evidence to suggest that he had deliberately disobeyed orders from the King, nor that he had plotted treason. In fact, it merely implied that Daine had not been ably supported in his position and therefore fell afoul of his own limitations as a commander.⁴⁴ This reflects the contemporary opinion expressed in *L'Indépendant*, which on 17 August accused Daine of grave incompetence, inertia, and neglect.⁴⁵ J. R. Leconte's verdict is much the same, laying more blame on the Army of the Meuse's Chief Intendent, Dufaure, than on the overburdened Daine himself.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Witte's revelation that Daine was offered 100,000 florins by Cockerill to lead an insurrection in Liège prior to the outbreak of hostilities, coupled with his questionable actions during the campaign itself, points to his guilt.⁴⁷ While Daine was certainly forced to contend with supply issues and its detrimental effect on the morale and physical capabilities of his men, his dalliance with Orangism both before and after the Ten Days' Campaign would suggest collusion with The Hague. Moreover, it would explain some of the controversial decisions made during the campaign that cannot simply be absolved by the 'the chaos of war'.

Nonetheless, Daine was not the only officer suspected of harbouring Orangist sympathies. Reports by brigade and regimental commanders were submitted to the Ministry of War in the immediate

⁴⁴ Leconte, *Le Général Daine*, pp. 118–139.

⁴⁵ *L'Indépendant*, 17 August 1831.

⁴⁶ Leconte, *Le Général Daine*, p. 102.

⁴⁷ Witte, *Royaume perdu*, pp. 326–327.

aftermath of the campaign exposing the extent (perceived or not) of its infiltration. Colonel Pletinckx of the 1st Lancers, for instance, suggested that the demoralisation and disorganisation that prevented his regiment from being committed to battle was because of mutual distrust between officers. In late July 1831, 17 or 18 officers implicated in the March counterrevolutionary drive had been acquitted and returned to the regiment *en masse* rather than be dispersed across the army. Pletinckx had given evidence against these officers but now found himself forced to reassimilate them into the regiment. Despite issuing threats that treason would be met with firm action, the standing of the regiment was compromised by this perceived Orangist element and prevented it from producing ‘a wonderful feat of arms’ that in its colonel’s exaggerated opinion might have gone down in the annals of military history.⁴⁸ What was more probable was the fact that, despite distinguishing itself in mundane reconnaissance and escort duties, the cavalry was simply poorly utilised during the campaign, to the point where General Du Marnesse found his brigades’ squadrons constantly being reassigned without his knowledge or approval.⁴⁹ Moreover, it is questionable whether an adequate opportunity arose for the cold steel of a cavalry charge to be decisive, or whether it possessed the officers capable of leading it.

Aside from the questionable loyalty of certain officers during the Ten Days’ Campaign, the most obvious factor explaining the army’s poor performance was its inexperience. The logistical requirements of an army at war in terms of food, clothing, and equipment was a source of constant complaint from all sections of the Army and Civic Guard.⁵⁰ Both found that, despite some heroic stands, its men were often very inexperienced in the face of the enemy. One such example, noted by General Daine, serves to highlight the confusion this caused:

By misfortune, the difficult period that we have just negotiated has created in this inexperienced army, lacking in experienced officers, a fatal spirit of indiscipline, with the natural zeal of youth adding yet another danger to this

⁴⁸ MRA 11/1/5, Notes by Colonel Pletinckx on the August Campaign and the Role of the 1st Lancers, 1831.

⁴⁹ MRA 11/2/7, General Du Marnesse to De Brouckère, 20 August 1831.

⁵⁰ Ibid.; MRA 11/2/9, Reports by Civic Guard Officers to De Brouckère about the August Campaign of 1831; MRA 11/2/10, Daine to Goethals, 9 August 1831; MRA 11/2/14, Daine to De Failly, 5 August 1831.

situation. Many soldiers fire their shots without orders, and for no reason, as seen recently in the principal attack on Kermt.⁵¹

Although one might expect such a young force to lack the fire-discipline of a long-established professional army, it is important to note that such impulsive behaviour cannot be ascribed solely to a lack of time spent on the drill square or firing range. The importance of quality officers and NCOs in managing and directing that fire has been shown time and again. E. J. Coss attributed a large part of the British infantrymen's success in the Peninsular War to junior leadership, which not only controlled the men's potentially catastrophic overzealousness but also their ability to seamlessly coordinate drill procedures on the battlefield.⁵² A generation after the Ten Days' Campaign, Prussian successes against Denmark, Austria-Hungary, and France were similarly a result of controlled firepower under the most accomplished system of direct command.⁵³ For the Belgian Army in 1831, the lack of experienced officers and NCOs was evident, particularly in units with large numbers of volunteers. This was not confined to the infantry's junior leadership alone however, but across other branches of the service and at more senior levels of command as well.

The greatest lacunae were to be found among the General Staff, artillery, and engineers. Only seven staff officers came over from Dutch service, leading to one assessment of the army's actions in the Ten Days' Campaign as having been conducted with 'a complete disregard for the art of war'.⁵⁴ By the beginning of 1831 there were just 33 trained artillery officers on the army's strength, capable of commanding six batteries. Worse still, there were only nine career officers available to the engineers. By July, this had risen to 129 and 32 respectively, although this was still short of the desired establishment.⁵⁵ This was partly a result of a Dutch policy to restrict Belgian influence in the Royal Army. Only three or four

⁵¹ MRA 11/2/14, Daine to De Brouckère, 9 August 1831.

⁵² E. J. Coss, *All for the King's Shilling: The British Soldier under Wellington, 1808–1814* (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 2010), pp. 163–173.

⁵³ G. Wawro, 'An "Army of Pigs": The Technical, Social, and Political Bases of Austrian Shock Tactics, 1859–1866', *Journal of Military History*, vol. 59, no. 3 (1995), pp. 413–414, & 421.

⁵⁴ Historique IRSD, *L'Institut Royal Supérieur de Défense: un Longue et Magnifique Histoire, 1830–1995* (Brussels, 1995), pp. 5–6.

⁵⁵ Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, pp. 19 and 24.

per 100 entrants to the Military School at Breda were Belgian, significantly stifling the acquisition of technical knowledge. Reports in May 1832 suggested that there had been only nine Belgian officers in the Dutch artillery prior to the Revolution. Although this is certainly an exaggeration, the remainder of the *L'Indépendant* article, claiming that the Belgian artillery was still 173 officers below establishment, appears closer to the mark.⁵⁶ This shortfall required immediate attention, as did the officer cadres of the other arms. The army's poor performance and the continuation of hostilities beyond 12 August 1831, spurred parliament into action. Leopold I was authorised to commission as many foreign officers as he deemed necessary for the duration of the war, precipitating an influx of French and Polish nationals intent on securing the nation under the auspices of an international movement of liberalism.

The French contribution was largely on official detachment, with officers receiving a step in promotion and a higher salary as incentives. In February 1833, there were 148 French officers in Belgian service, of which 122 were junior officers. Their numbers dropped to 91 in 1834, and 77 by 1835, with 49 of the latter being seconded from the Army of the North following its role in Belgium's liberation.⁵⁷ The overall French presence, however, was augmented by 163 French-born officers serving in the various volunteer corps raised during the Revolution.⁵⁸ Even though their presence clearly helped to establish the Belgian Army on a sound footing, suspicion of French motives was expressed both at home and

⁵⁶ *L'Indépendant*, 8 May 1832. A counterargument by an anonymous officer in the same issue argued that the artillery only required 151 officers (17 senior officers, 21 captains *en premier*, 11 captains *en second*, 31 first lieutenants, and 71 second-lieutenants). Moreover, he claimed that there was plenty of experience among those already commissioned, with three of the 17 high-ranking officers having been captains in 1813 in the Imperial Army, and nine others also serving as officers at this time. Four others had been officers since 1815 and another one since 1816. All 17 had served under William I, and only two could be said to have had their careers interfered with. As for the captains *en premier*, all had been in Dutch service, save for two who arrived from France recently. Indeed, most of them had been officers for 15 or 16 years. Similarly, many captains *en second*, and first lieutenants had been commissioned before the Revolution. In all, the article stated that 43 officers in the artillery in 1832 had served under the Dutch.

⁵⁷ J. R. Leconte, *La Formation Historique de l'Armée Belge: Les Officiers Étrangers au Service de la Belgique (1830–1853)* (Imprimerie des papeteries de Genval, Paris & Brussels, 1949), pp. 142–147; Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, in which he claims there were 104 French officers in 1833, p. 42.

⁵⁸ AER POS.2314/261, Rogier Papers, Evain to Rogier, 16 April 1834.

abroad. Although the Netherlands was the immediate enemy, France's support for Belgian independence could easily be misconstrued as a subversive attempt to extend its sphere of influence over a region that it had coveted since 1814.

The short-lived *reunioniste* movement of 1831–1832 among Walloon industrialists seeking access to French markets only added credence to the possibility of some form of merger.⁵⁹ The rise of Frenchmen to positions of significant influence—that is, General Louis Evain, Minister of War from 1832 to 1836, and General Jean Chapelié founder of the *École Militaire* in 1834—only added fuel to the flames. Unsurprisingly, the Orangist *Messenger de Gand* led the charge in 1835 against this state of affairs, attacking the new academy's admission criteria, which offered advantages to French speakers: 'This is how, little by little, the French emissaries are exploiting the Belgian nation for its own profit, moulding it for Louis-Philippe's use'.⁶⁰ Similar opposition could be found in the Chamber of Representatives, where the Liberal Joseph Lebeau, later Prime Minister from 1840 to 1841, attempted to replace Evain with Gérard Buzen but was thwarted by Royal intervention on account of the excellent services rendered. Still, further complaints were made by, and on behalf of, Belgian officers who felt that they had been cast aside in favour of French officers pursuing a French agenda at the expense of national interests.⁶¹

While large numbers of French officers filled gaps in the infantry, several Polish officers were entrusted with professionalising the cavalry and artillery. Generals Ignacy Marcei Kruszewski and Prot Feliks Prószyński were two such figures, both of whom had fought in Poland's own failed bid for independence from Russia during the winter of 1830–1831. Largely because of these men, some 48 officers were recommended and accepted into Belgian service between 1832 and 1839 as part of the Polish diaspora that swept westward across Europe. Part of their decision to take up service in a foreign army was a belief that

⁵⁹ *Reunionisme* was largely restricted to Verviers, Liège and wider Hainaut, with some interest amongst selected industries in Luxembourg. Following the consolidation of the state after 1832, talk of reunification with France largely ceased—though some members continued to fight for the same commercial interests under the Orangist banner. See, Stengers, 'Sentiment national', vol. 28, no. 3 (1950), pp. 1008–1029.

⁶⁰ *Messenger de Gand*, 20 April 1835.

⁶¹ Leconte, *La Formation Historique de l'Armée Belge*, pp. 145–180; Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, pp. 42–43; Witte, *Royaume perdu*, p. 303.

Belgium was fighting for a similar cause against the Dutch as they were against the Russians. Indeed, the Polish insurrection on 29 November 1830 had been partially inspired by events in Paris and Brussels earlier that year. A feeling of revolution had pervaded Warsaw for some time, but the Tsar's intentions to march with Polish troops to the aid of the House of Orange against the Belgian revolutionaries proved to be a catalyst for action. To have participated against Belgian liberal brothers-in-arms would have been tantamount to 'political and moral suicide'.⁶² This, they avoided. Defeat in Poland's plight did not mean the end of their political struggle, however. Officers, common soldiers, along with a host of Poland's liberal elite, emigrated in order to cooperate with western revolutionaries to achieve the political ascendancy that had eluded them in their homeland. As noted by one Polish historian, the 'emigration was conceived as a pilgrimage, a purifying process in the search of freedom and justice'.⁶³

Some 9,000 émigrés descended on Paris, which became the veritable headquarters of Polish national life, counting among its members some of the greatest names in literature, history, music, and political thought. Nevertheless, the concentration of thousands of revolutionaries posed its own problems for internal order, while pressure from Russia, particularly concerning the military insurrectionists, forced the French authorities to usher many of them across the border. Leopold I welcomed them with open arms. Faced with continuing hostilities in 1832, both parties could hope to benefit from this unlikely union. The Belgians were eager to acquire experienced officers, while the Poles found in Belgium a nation fighting for the very principles they cherished so dearly, empowering them to fight for their cause with renewed vigour—albeit on a different battlefield. Major Armand von Brochowski recalled his motivation in the following terms:

[W]hat could our goal have been, in taking to foreign service, if not to support a struggle that might spread further, conquer or die if required, in the hope that one day, other brothers luckier than us, might return to the sacred

⁶² J. Lukaszewski, 'Les révolutions belge et polonaise (1830–1831)', in I. Goddeeris and P. Lierneux (eds.), *1830 Insurrection polonaise – Indépendance belge* (Academia-Bruylant, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2001), p. 33. For more on Polish links to the Belgian revolution, see other chapters in this volume.

⁶³ P. S. Wandycz, *A History of East Central Europe, Vol. VII: The Lands of Partitioned Poland 1795–1918* (University of Washington Press, Seattle & London, 1974), p. 118.

hearths of the nation; it was changing location without changing flag nor dreams.⁶⁴

Prószynski, similarly implored the Minister of War to accept him and his fellow officers' humble request for commissions.⁶⁵ Their incorporation, inadvertently, made the Belgian Army a refuge for foreign liberals, although it has been argued that many Poles 'acquired an exaggerated notion of international solidarity among peoples' in the process.⁶⁶

The international dimension of early nineteenth century armies and of a sprawling wave of European liberalism ought not to be completely disregarded though. It was not uncommon for armies to commission foreign officers permanently or on detachment for a period of time to exchange knowledge or gain experience. Christopher Duffy and, latterly, Stephen Conway have used the term 'military Europe' to describe this phenomenon in the eighteenth century, though it might well be applied to a post-Napoleonic context with but minor qualifications.⁶⁷ Indeed, the legacy of mercenary recruitment and a quarter of a century of near constant European war spanning the length and breadth of the continent, made the appearance of non-nationals exceptionally commonplace. The most notable example is that of the French Army, whose Foreign Legion, from its inception in 1831, provided an outlet for Europe's political refugees to take up military service.⁶⁸ Even the Dutch Army opposing Belgium in the 1830s contained thousands of Germans, Prussians, Hanoverians, and Swiss in its ranks and among its officers corps. It made the Belgian prospect of raising an entire Polish Legion from among the émigrés entirely plausible save for the reluctance expressed by Louis-Philippe. Already, in April 1831, attempts were made to raise a regiment in Ath from among north-Brabant and German deserters from the Dutch Army. In September, another scheme to form a foreign legion under Achille Murat, the eldest

⁶⁴MRA Officer File, von Brochowski 2596/67, Memorandum to King Leopold I, 24 November 1846.

⁶⁵MRA Officer File, Prószynski 2545/8, Letter to Evain, May 1832.

⁶⁶Wandycz, *A History of East Central Europe*, p. 118.

⁶⁷C. Duffy, *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason* (Routledge & Keegan Paul, London & New York, 1987); S. Conway, 'The British Army, "Military Europe," and the American War of Independence', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 67, no. 1 (2010), pp. 69–100.

⁶⁸D. Porch, *The French Foreign Legion: A Complete History* (Macmillan London Ltd., London & Basingstoke, 1991), pp. 1–21.

son of Joachim Murat, and to be officered by Neapolitans, Calabrians, Piedmontese, Prussians, Brunswickans, English, and three Belgians was undertaken also, even though it failed to recruit more than a single battalion.⁶⁹ This unit recruited until 1839 and unofficially saw service in Algeria, Spain, and Portugal. It became an easy outlet through which to channel the military aspirations of the large number of foreign revolutionaries congregating around Brussels as well as a way to rid the army of the unsavoury elements of Belgium's Disciplinary Companies.⁷⁰ Although it may be deemed a failure, it did provide the first opportunity for Belgian nationals to see action abroad.

Geoffrey Best contends that, for the less-established nations of the early nineteenth century, foreign service offered a possibility to reaffirm a commitment to common ideals across a host of liberation movements sweeping Europe.⁷¹ Those in Greece, Poland, Germany, Hungary, and Italy, let alone the Iberian Peninsula—and later the United States—were just some of the battlefields that attracted volunteers. For Belgians, this was often the case. Mark Lawrence has pointed to the Belgian Auxiliary Legion during the First Carlist War as 'the most seasoned Liberal internationalists', comprised of veterans of the Belgian Revolution and the Portuguese Civil War. Their presence among a myriad of volunteers from across Europe demonstrates just how much European Liberals conceived of the struggle against Carlism 'in international rather than merely Spanish terms'.⁷² A number of Poles similarly were drawn to this war. The most influential such auxiliary was Joseph Tánski, an officer in the French Foreign Legion,

⁶⁹ J. R. Leconte, 'Les débuts de l'Armée belge après la Révolution de 1830 et ses corollaires coloniaux', *Carnet de la Fourragère*, vol. 14, no. 4 (1962), p. 283; Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, pp. 44–45.

⁷⁰ One surviving recruitment list of 974 suggests that 27.6% were taken from these companies, with the rest comprised of 18.8% voluntary enlistments from the army, 42.2% of non-nationals from 'foreigner depots', 3.3% of convicts from the Aalst prison, and 7.9% partisans. MRA, Belgian Military Abroad, Portugal II/69, Enlistment of personnel for service in Portugal [undated, probably 1832–1833]. For more, see J. Lorette, 'Les expéditions militaires belges au Portugal en 1832 et 1833', *Carnet de la Fourragère*, vol. 8, no. 8 (1948), pp. 427–473, and vol. 9, no. 2 (1950), pp. 95–140.

⁷¹ G. Best, *War and Society in Revolutionary Europe, 1770–1870* (Leicester University Press, Leicester, 1982), p. 256. See also several contributions in S. Aprile, J.-C. Caron, and E. Fureix (eds.), *La Liberté Guidant les Peuples: Les Révolutions de 1830 en Europe* (Champ Vallon, Seyssel, 2013).

⁷² M. Lawrence, *Spain's First Carlist War, 1833–1840* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014), pp. 99–100.

but the war also attracted the aforementioned Armand von Brochowski. In keeping with his request to join the Belgian Army, von Brochowski was accepted into Queen Isabella II's forces because of his 'generous sentiments, which push him towards the defence of liberty'.⁷³ His service file offers a detailed account of the experiences of a cavalry officer during the First Carlist War, in which he continuously requests permission to remain in order to further his military education.⁷⁴ It is just one example, among many, of the extent to which the transfer of political ideology and military expertise was a transnational phenomenon during the 1830s.

Despite being a nation founded on liberal principles, many Belgian officers were less than welcoming of their Polish brothers-in-arms. Indeed, the harmonisation of national and personal interest was a difficult balancing act, and many Belgians felt that Leopold I's decision to incorporate foreign officers into the army denied them their rightful positions and opportunities. This resulted in a series of discriminatory actions directed against French and Polish officers alike. Von Brochowski, for example, was convinced that his stagnation in the army was caused by harmful rumours spread by his fellow officers following his decision to serve in Spain.⁷⁵ Others were known to have disagreements over questions of honour.⁷⁶ Two of the more high-profile cases concerned Generals Prószyński and Kruszewski themselves. The former complained of being undermined and humiliated at every opportunity while working as a staff officer in the 3rd Division under General l'Olivier, prompting him to judge his position untenable and to request an immediate transfer.⁷⁷ Similarly, Kruszewski was the subject of ill will when poised to take command of the 2nd *Chasseurs à Cheval* in 1832, following the decision to abandon the idea of a Polish Legion. Officers in the regiment were opposed to the prospect of

⁷³ MRA Officer File, von Brochowski 2596/149, Letter from Don Antonio Guiroga, 15 September 1837.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 2569/8, Report from Spain, 11 December 1837; 2569/24, von Brochowski to Willmar, 16 June 1838.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 2569/71, von Brochowski to Prisse, 28 February 1847.

⁷⁶ MRA Officer File, Grabowski 2587, Grabowski to Willmar, 5 May 1837; Grabowski to Commandant of the Brigade of Cuirassiers, 28 July 1837; Gordaszewski 3999/13, Proposition of Corps Transfer, September 1841.

⁷⁷ MRA Officer File, Prószyński 2545/20, Prószyński to Buzen, March 1841.

serving under a foreigner and openly threatened to hound him from the regiment.⁷⁸

Issues regarding seniority, ranks, and pensions only added to the difficulties faced by the contingent of Polish officers. Many left the service after the signing of peace with the Netherlands in 1839, seeking fresh adventure in the name of liberalism rather than resigning themselves to the monotony of barrack life. Those who remained were granted a two-year extension to their terms of service during which time they could apply for naturalisation as Belgian citizens. By 1842, *l'Indépendance Belge* reported that 14 Polish officers had been, or were in the process of becoming, naturalised.⁷⁹ Nonetheless, tensions between Belgium and Russia over the Skrzynecki Affair in 1839, in which Leopold I had actively sought the exiled Polish General for a divisional command, eventually took its toll.⁸⁰ By 1853, changes on the international diplomatic stage forced the hand of the Belgian Parliament, which passed a law on 13 March officially terminating their engagements. The remaining 13 Polish officers were pensioned-off with immediate effect, receiving between ₣1,800 and 4,125 per year based on their rank and length of service.⁸¹ Although it brought an abrupt end to the tangible link between the Belgian Army and the international liberal movement of the 1830s, the legacy of Poland's contribution in securing the nation remained. Not only was their work in reorganising the cavalry and technical arms important in the short term, but many Polish officers' sons would later obtain commissions as well. Indeed, by June 1869, 13 out of the 37 foreign officers in service were of Polish origin, constituting a veritable Polish military tradition within the Belgian Army.⁸²

While still in post, however, the presence of foreign officers in the early 1830s, significantly contributed to the renewal of Orangist agitation within the Belgian officer corps. Although no more than 14% of officers by 1834 had served in the Royal Army, the tensions between professionals

⁷⁸ MRA Officer File, Kruszewski 2586/10, Inquiry concerning the appointment of Kruszewski to the 2nd *Chasseurs à Cheval*. Hostility of Officers, 11 May 1832.

⁷⁹ *L'Indépendance Belge*, 6 June 1842.

⁸⁰ C. Merzbach, 'Les Officiers Polonais dans l'Armée Belge après 1830', *Le Flambeau* (1931), pp. 9–11; Leconte, 'Les débuts', p. 282; Thomas, *The Guarantee*, pp. 60–61.

⁸¹ *L'Indépendance Belge*, 5 April 1853.

⁸² T. Panecki, 'Les Officiers Polonais dans l'Armée Belge 1839–1853', in Goddeeris and Lierneux (eds.), *1830 Insurrection Polonaise*, p. 94; Leconte, *La Formation Historique de l'Armée Belge*, pp. 169–170.

and volunteer opportunists, who constituted some 34%, were only exacerbated by the influx of French and Polish officers keen to secure the Revolution.⁸³ In April 1834, discontent transformed into counterrevolutionary action once more. The mood among Belgian Orangists reflected that in the army.

Industrialists, too, felt that opportunities were being denied to them under the new regime and yearned for the profitable yields of the past. In particular, the Flanders cotton industry suffered from the closure of the lucrative East Indies markets. In November 1833, a petition signed by 60 Ghent industrialists with Orangist sympathies was presented to Leopold I. This was followed by action from more than 100 Brussels industrialists with similar frustrations, echoing the views being expressed across the country that the only victors out of this state of affairs were British entrepreneurs who were filling their pockets in an uncompetitive market.⁸⁴ Belgium, the next most-developed industrialised centre after Britain, could not afford to be left behind on account of the idealistic whims of the intellectual elite of the professional bourgeoisie. Together with the agitated commercial and industrial middle classes were the 'old' nobility, whose wealth procurement from land—and consequently their political influence—was already in decline during the early 1830s. Unhappy at the heavy tax levied on land by the new regime and the advantages accorded to certain industries and the finance sectors, in which they only belatedly became involved, many longed for the return of William I.⁸⁵ Eager to make their presence felt once more, Belgian Orangists saw the opportunity to make their mark over a relatively trivial matter. For some time, they had objected to the systematic sale of the Prince of Orange's sequestered belongings by the Belgian State. But when Wexy, the horse that the Prince of Orange rode at Waterloo, was put up for sale in February 1834, it was perceived as a personal slight against his person. A public subscription was opened among Orangists with a view to purchasing and returning the beast to its rightful owner. It was a symbolic gesture of continued support for the restoration, but one that would reignite the passions of the Revolution.

⁸³ Witte, *Royaume perdu*, pp. 302–303.

⁸⁴ F. Judo, 'De lange aanloop naar de aprilrellen van 1834: Een bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van het orangisme te Brussel, 1832–1834', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, vol. 26, no. 1–2 (1996), pp. 92–93.

⁸⁵ Clark, 'Nobility', pp. 151–165.

When published lists detailing the names and addresses of contributors began to surface on 4 April 1834, Brussels became the scene of the largest anti-Orangist riots of the period. The damage to property over the next two days was carried out in the name of patriotism. Ironically, though, it only served to add value to subscriptions as the targeting of law-abiding Orangists discredited Belgium on the international stage.⁸⁶ In total 17 buildings were sacked, totalling F301,453 of damage.⁸⁷ These included the residences of the duc d'Ursel, the Prince de Ligne, the Marquis de Trazegnies, and the Count de Béthune. What worried the authorities most was the attitude of the *Force Publique*, which in the cases of the army and the Civic Guard, often remained deliberately passive in their defence of property or actively engaged in the looting.

Events in Brussels were repeated in other parts of the country, albeit less aggressively. In Ghent the working-class population expressed a sense of patriotic indignation rather than take to the streets. Meanwhile, Leuven, which had already witnessed scenes of unrest in March regarding the establishment of a Catholic University, witnessed minor disturbances in which 400 youths converged on local landowners but refrained from excessive looting.⁸⁸ Although, in some senses, unified action to combat the counterrevolutionary movement with force and to preserve the heritage of 1830 confirmed a sense of patriotism, the projected image of a nation united was once again exposed as a myth. Leopold I's reputation was sallied, and Belgium itself was depicted as an unstable country in which the working classes took upon themselves the right to pillage.

The lack of adequate military intervention can largely be explained by two things. First, the law restricting the army's interference until all other measures had been exhausted. Second, the introduction of martial law in 1833, which saw regiments garrisoned in cities with Orangist tendencies. Under the impression that their primary duty was to safeguard the legacy of the Revolution, soldiers struck up cordial relationships with loyalist elements in the population, whose vigilance and vigilantism were often confused. As Gita Deneckere notes, 'The army was both a patriotic extension

⁸⁶ Witte, *Royaume perdu*, p. 355.

⁸⁷ G. Deneckere, 'De plundering van de orangistische adel in April 1834: de komplottheorie voorbij', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, vol. 26, no. 3-4 (1996), p. 35.

⁸⁸ Ibid.; AER POS.2314/261, Rogier Papers, Lebeau to Rogier, 10 March 1834; Governor of East Flanders to Rogier, 8 April 1834.

of the central government and a pillar in the maintenance of order'.⁸⁹ In essence, it was often caught between a rock and a hard place. The Minister of Justice, Joseph Lebeau, issued a circular in the wake of the Brussels riots reminding the provincial authorities that despite the wish among certain sections of the population to counter antinationalist opinion, it was the Government's duty to ensure that those targeted benefitted from the protection offered to them by the laws of the land.⁹⁰ Yet, this was easier said than done. Municipal autonomy and the structure of local police forces meant that the central government was often outpaced by popular protests, while local authorities and regimental officers struggled to retain control over the forces at their disposal. Many soldiers simply stood aside, leaving the entire weight of responsibility to fall on the Civic Guard, whose Commander-in-Chief later reported were ill-equipped to deal with the fury of the assembled crowds.⁹¹

This may well have been purposeful, as many officers felt it more prudent to confine their men to the barracks, while others felt unable to act until such time as they were called out by the civil authorities. A breakdown in communication undoubtedly hindered the response and it took until the morning of 6 April for the Minister of War to organise the remaining troops and place them under civilian control. Following an interview with Leopold I, it was decided to direct troops across the city and to 'repel force with force', though not until early afternoon did the Council of Ministers authorise the army to act independently of the municipal authorities—albeit illegally.⁹²

One of the other motives for inaction, and even cooperation with the rioters, was the legacy of 1830. Soldiers were afraid of using force against assembled crowds for fear of being accused of unwarranted aggression, or worse still, being branded traitors.⁹³ Officers, too, remembered the Revolution, where Dutch soldiers received unsavoury reputations as

⁸⁹ Deneckere, 'De plundering van de orangistische adel', pp. 43–44.

⁹⁰ AER POS.2314/261, Rogier Papers, Circular by Lebeau to Provincial Authorities, 6 April 1834.

⁹¹ Ibid., Commander in Chief, the Inspector General of the Civic Guard to Rogier, 10 April 1834.

⁹² Ibid., Auditeur Général to Rogier, 21 April 1834; AER POS.2314/263, Rogier Papers, Report by Evain, [undated] April 1834. For the illegality of this action, see Deneckere, 'De plundering van de orangistische adel', p. 49.

⁹³ Ibid., Auditeur Général to Rogier, 21 April 1834.

butchers for turning their weapons on the populace.⁹⁴ Rather than risk facing such consequences, and often feeling more politically allied with the rioters, many soldiers simply embraced the situation and readily became embroiled in the orgy of drunken looting. After all, they argued, such behaviour was patriotic. Many soldiers and rioters claimed after the event that the King had personally ordered the looting and as such were merely acting as loyal citizens. Certainly, the presence of Leopold I and Charles Rogier on horseback amid the assembled crowds could have been misconstrued as an act of consent. In reality, they were merely trying to restore order.⁹⁵ Clearly, 'public justice' went too far, and the *Force Publique's* involvement was harmful to the liberal ideals they purported to uphold. Nevertheless, it also demonstrated the army's and Civic Guard's continued willingness to secure the nation against real or perceived threats. The working and lower-middle classes, who comprised most of the rioters and the complicit rank and file, revealed the importance of the King's person to this concept with constant refrains of '*Vive le Roi*'.⁹⁶ Conversely, the 1834 riots also underlined the importance of mass support to the monarchy and the continued exclusion of the old order.⁹⁷

From the Government's point of view, the best way of justifying the populace's actions in support of the establishment was to meet dissent head on. To this end, Lebeau proposed a bill in June 1834 penalising all forms of Orangism, forcing many to leave Belgium or face the consequences. Naturally journalists, such as the *Messenger de Gand's* two principal writers, as well as important community figures, faced fines and incarceration. Rogier and Lebeau equally took the opportunity to distance themselves from French and Polish republicans. The bill was framed in such a way as to suggest that it was designed to protect Orangists from themselves. The Government could never again allow the people to take matters into their own hands and therefore had to remove from them the opportunity to riot again.⁹⁸ Any counterrevolutionary rhetoric or actions were prohibited but, in so doing, threatened Belgium's cherished liberal principles.

⁹⁴Deneckere, 'De plundering van de orangistische adel', p. 48.

⁹⁵Ibid., pp. 36 and 40–41.

⁹⁶F. Van Kalken, *Commotions Populaires en Belgique, 1834–1902* (Office de Publicité, Brussels, 1936), pp. 16–20.

⁹⁷Deneckere, 'De plundering van de orangistische adel', p. 43.

⁹⁸Witte, *Royaume perdu*, pp. 356–358.

The governmental regime established in 1830 was entirely based on a system, which granted a dominant role to the press. This parliamentarianism was a direct expression of the belief that the interests of social groups could be attained through reasoning and discussion. One of Parliament's primary missions was to restrict the level of state power that might make decisions contrary to the interests of its citizens, even those in minority groups. The press, therefore, was to play the role of an arbiter in the public debate. From this moment on, in the case of Orangists at least, they were excluded from the public stage and forced to adopt more moderate means in pursuit of their interests.⁹⁹ It has even been argued that Rogier and Lebeau deliberately incited the riots as a political ploy to perpetually weaken Orangism. Their resignations just three months later only served to reinforce this theory.¹⁰⁰

Orangism was not removed from the political scene, but it was forced to evolve to fit within the constraints of the parliamentary structure. The development of Brussels as a centre proved to be important in stabilising the country, exerting an ideological (in this case liberal), economic and cultural influence over the periphery, which minimised the effect of dissenting voices. Orangism was swiftly distanced from the heart of the nation.¹⁰¹ The simultaneous establishment of a more organised military force also curbed the influence of the counterrevolution on Orangist officers, who could no longer operate securely under the cover of institutional disorder.¹⁰² Under the stewardship of both Charles de Brouckère and Louis Evain as Ministers of War, the army grew in size from 76,000 men in September 1831 to more than 100,000 men by November 1832.¹⁰³ This was achieved in spite of a general unwillingness in Parliament, which was only circumvented by the presence of a handful of former and serving officers elected

⁹⁹ Witte, *Le Moniteur Belge*, p. 10; Deneckere, 'De plundering van de orangistische adel', pp. 51–52.

¹⁰⁰ Witte, *Royaume perdu*, p. 354.

¹⁰¹ Witte, 'The Formation', p. 439.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 373–374.

¹⁰³ E. A. Jacobs, 'Contribution à l'étude du milieu militaire belge. Les officiers au parlement (1831–1848)', *Revue Internationale d'Histoire Militaire*, vol. 24 (1965), pp. 415–416. Intermediary figures for March 1832 suggest that the Army of Observation alone accounted for 72,305 men of which 64,004 were present under arms. This was broken down into 15,008 Civic Guard, 47,880 infantrymen, 4,136 cavalry, 2,542 artillery, and 2,739 ancillary service personnel. RA, Archives du Cabinet du Roi, Leopold I 255, Situation of the Army of Observation: Report, 15 March 1832.

to both houses. Although small in number (1.3% of parliamentary seats in 1836) compared to France (22.8% in 1836) and Britain (almost 20% between 1790 and 1820), their energy in defence of the army's requirements helped to place it on a sounder footing during the 1830s.¹⁰⁴ More than that, the army began a process of legitimising itself before the country and the world through its annual manoeuvres under the supervision of its French officer contingent.

Initially conducted at the observation camp at Diest from 1831, the manoeuvres played a role in the process of militarisation in Belgium, bringing together the military and civilian spheres in the nascent State. For an army that lacked established traditions and a population still unaccustomed to a coherent idea of Belgian patriotism, the extension of military manoeuvres—conducted at the permanent camp of Beverloo from 1835 onwards—served the dual purpose of politically unifying the country and demonstrating to foreign observers that Belgium had taken its place at Europe's top table.¹⁰⁵ Significantly, it gave officers the opportunity of handling large formations while improving the discipline and effectiveness of the rank and file. The combination of a more organised and politically unified army reduced the chances of a military coup from succeeding. By the end of the 1830s, the increasingly homogenous force began to exert itself as the protector of independence as well as a projection of the society from which it was drawn. This meant that it was better prepared to meet the threat of Orangism, be it externally or from within.

Debate over the XXIV Articles of the Treaty of London in 1839, offered Orangism a fleeting opportunity to turn a potential European conflagration into a favourable scenario for a restoration. Even though William I appeared resigned to losing the nine provinces of the South, questions over the future possession of Limburg and, particularly, Luxembourg had the potential to exacerbate the situation and draw the German Confederation into military action. D. H. Thomas has shown that relations with Berlin and Vienna became strained over several issues during the 1830s, not least of which was the continued Belgian presence and claims over Luxembourg.¹⁰⁶ The Grand Duchy was a member of the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 423; H. Strachan, *The Politics of the British Army* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997), p. 27.

¹⁰⁵ B. Dierckx and J. Hoegaerts, 'Exercising neutrality: The practice of manoeuvres in the Belgian Army before the Great War', *Journal of Belgian History*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2016), pp. 23–33.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas, *The Guarantee*, pp. 61–62.

German Confederation and Luxembourg City's fortress was garrisoned by Prussian troops, even though the surrounding area operated under Belgian civil authority. The 1831 Treaty of London, to which Belgium was a signatory, made clear that it had no claims over the Grand Duchy or Dutch Limburg, despite a nationalist rhetoric for a greater Belgium that envisioned a federation between them and German Rhenish provinces.¹⁰⁷ The argument that the population would be happy to relegate ethnic and linguistic ties in order to share in Belgian ideals of liberty was perceived as nonsense by German diplomats. Suggestions that a union would create a more effective buffer that would strengthen the international system were laughed off as undermining the very principles of guaranteed neutrality being offered.¹⁰⁸ Between 1835 and 1837 Belgium appeared to have flagrantly disregarded such assurances in any case when Berlin felt threatened by the proposed construction of a fortification line from Antwerp to Hasselt in the north, while keeping its southern frontiers open to the French.¹⁰⁹ In any event, financial constraints prevented the '*forts de la Campine*' from being built, although improvements to the fortified camp at Diest did begin in 1837. Tensions rose, but common sense prevailed.

When William I acknowledged the waning support for his costly endeavour to retrieve his lost provinces in 1838–1839, the diplomatic pathway to reconciliation was opened for Europe's diplomats to exploit. Conscious of the change in circumstances since the 1831 Treaty, Belgium was forced to accept the loss of direct access to the Scheldt, Dutch Limburg, and the eastern portion of Luxembourg, which passed to William of Orange as Grand Duke but remained part of the German Confederation. The 1839 Treaty of London, which would later be referred to disparagingly as the 'scrap of paper', also imposed perpetual neutrality on Belgium, guaranteed by the Great Powers (Britain, France, Germany, Austria, and Russia), significantly restricting Belgium's manoeuvrability on the international stage. The draconian terms, irksome at the time, assumed an even greater role in Belgian national consciousness over the course of the nineteenth century. The loss of the irredenta of Limburg and Luxembourg has been shown to

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁰⁸ Viane, *Belgium*, p. 145.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas, *The Guarantee*, pp. 64–71.

have deeply affected the prosecution of Belgian diplomacy to the point where the 'nation' had to be completed overseas through colonial expansion.¹¹⁰ Along with the dispensing of neutrality, Belgian territorial ambitions formed the nucleus of its war aims and diplomatic efforts throughout the First World War and beyond.¹¹¹ As in 1839, however, Belgium was left disappointed by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919.

The drawn-out negotiations of 1839 favoured Orangist agitators, who sought to profit from the concurrent internal tensions within Belgium that came with the economic crisis in the Ghent cotton industry. Once again, officers, such as Daine and l'Olivier, were contacted to prepare a military coup to take Brussels. Aware of staunchly loyal elements to the Belgian State within the *Guides*, *Grenadiers*, and *Chasseurs*, these regiments were to be excluded from the operation. The rest of the troops under Daine's command, whose services might be bought, would march on Brussels where Orangist representatives would condemn the Treaty of London and proclaim the fall of King Leopold I. This would precipitate a reaction from the disaffected populations in Ghent and Liège whose rally to the cause would all but confirm a popular mandate for the restoration. As with previous counterrevolutionary attempts, though, the army failed to come through. Officers were not confident in its success and were fearful of the repercussions. Daine and l'Olivier sought assurances from The Hague that the Dutch Army would back the coup but this seemed less than forthcoming. Lacking guaranteed support from within and faced with apathy from William I, on whose behalf they were willing to risk their futures, the entire enterprise appeared too much of a gamble for most officers.¹¹² Enthusiasm waned, and the movement never got off the ground. A few suspected conspirators were, nonetheless, removed from positions of influence in its aftermath but the authorities, once again, favoured a policy of conciliation over retribution. Generals Wauthier and Nypels were retired, while Daine was moved away from his accomplices. Others were simply placed under constant surveillance.

The Vandersmissen Affair of 1840, which hailed the beginning of Orangism's last flourish in Belgium the following year, was similarly

¹¹⁰V. Viaene, 'King Leopold's imperialism and the origins of the Belgian Colonial Party, 1860–1905', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 80, no. 4 (2008), pp. 753–754.

¹¹¹D. Stevenson, 'Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Defence of Western Europe, 1914–1920', *International History Review*, vol. 4, no. 4 (1982), pp. 506–514.

¹¹²Witte, *Royaume perdu*, pp. 362–374.

doomed to failure because of the army's inherent loyalty in the face of The Hague's vacillation. The disgraced officer took advantage of the signing of the XXIV Articles to present his rehabilitation dossier to Parliament having observed many of his 1831 coconspirators rise through the ranks during his exile in Prussia. Under the XXIV Articles, no one could legally be discriminated against for their politics, a stance that the Catholic government of Barthélémy de Theux de Meylandt was fully prepared to accept. Nevertheless, the Liberals, sensing an opportunity to seize power, successfully blocked the move in Parliament by arguing that restoring a traitor to the army would only encourage further Orangist activity.¹¹³ The de Theux Ministry fell in April 1840 as a result but, ironically, triggered Belgium's last serious counterrevolutionary movement in the Autumn of 1841.

In response to the changing political climate in the Netherlands following the abdication of William I in favour of his son King William II (formerly Prince of Orange) in October 1840, the wheels of Belgian Orangism were once again greased for action. Orangist sympathisers within the Belgian officer corps had always favoured King William II over his father and were seemingly prepared to risk much more for his cause than they had in 1839. General Tiecken de Terhove suggested that many officers on the active, reserve, and retired lists, as well as rank and file veterans, had canvassed support for, and recruited men into, the new movement. Among them were many of the old protagonists from the period 1831–1839.¹¹⁴ Brussels and Leopold I were, once again, the targets. William II was to lead his Dutch Army into Belgium to ward off any French response and secure the region through force of arms. While this was guaranteed, Belgian Orangists remained committed to the restoration. As soon as The Hague began to hesitate, support quickly melted away. The timing was all wrong for King William II, who abandoned proceedings on 26 September ahead of an important budgetary discussion in the Estates General, leaving many wondering whether this signalled a delay or a cancellation. Moles within the movement took this opportunity to reaffirm their commitment to the Belgian State by leaking information to the authorities.

On 29 October, key figures, including the Vandersmissen brothers, were seized along with a stash of arms. The formerly exiled Jacques Vandersmissen was sentenced to death for his part in the affair but escaped

¹¹³ Ibid., pp. 485–487.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 488–489.

to Prussia with the aid of his wife, where he lived until 1856. Most other officers implicated in the movement, once again, evaded sanction and were merely called before an internal inquiry to testify. One officer was banished from the kingdom and two others suspended from duty, one of which was Daine. It was felt that too harsh a reprisal would only lead to worse consequences in the future and, as the latter 1830s had shown, internal stability alongside a more organised military force had already begun to minimise the reach of the counterrevolution.¹¹⁵ Officers were happier to work within the system than against it, while the rank and file had consistently proven difficult to mobilise in favour of a restoration.

Internal and external forces were always going to threaten the consolidation process of the Revolution, and in Belgium's case these were both persistent and, at times, dangerous. Yet the strength of the nascent State was in its liberal ideals, which drew together disparate populations from within its geographical confines, as well as from across Europe, to defend its famous Constitution. In the *Force Publique*, Belgium had its first national institution willing, though not always fully capable, of defending the liberties won in 1830. Its rank and file largely reflected the will of the society from which it was drawn and increasingly played a role in marginalising the threat of Orangism that spoke only to an 'old' aristocratic and industrialist-bourgeois minority. Its loyalty—occasionally even its overt patriotism in actively supporting 'public justice' against enemies of the State—helped secure the nation from within. Although question marks hung uncomfortably over elements of a disaffected officer corps for much of the period, Orangism struggled to gain a substantial and lasting foothold. Loyal elements consistently outweighed the dissident minority and contributed, together with French and Polish officers, to establish a more organised military force following the debacle of the Ten Days' Campaign. This was seen as essential in complimenting the authorities' conciliatory policy towards Orangist sympathisers who were increasingly convinced to work with, rather than against, the ever-strengthening State. Although undoubtedly a risky policy, securing the nation, from a military standpoint, partially revolved around the principle of 'better the devil you know'.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 490–493.

The Officer Corps

As the professionalising influence of French and Polish officers gradually dissipated with the passing of the turbulent 1830s, the desire to establish an officer corps of suitably trained Belgian officers to lead the army into a new period of relative stability was of paramount importance. The peace of 1839, and the resultant imposed neutrality, had not removed the army's responsibility to prepare for the defence of the nation—if anything the real work began then. As such the officer corps was charged with sustaining and improving the professional ethos laid down during the 1830s, while simultaneously reflecting the evolving ideals of Belgium's liberal society. Entrusted with the physical and moral training of annual contingents of young, balloted conscripts, officers were encouraged to become 'the fathers' of the nation.¹

Yet, as peacetime soldiering became the seemingly endless norm after 1839, the officer corps struggled to balance internal grievances with a public image and suitable status within society. Some officers managed to gain experience in foreign armies, though the majority were either not afforded the opportunity or chose not to take it. Others merely lapsed into despair as the drudgery of garrison life mutated into a simmering discontent. Promotion rates slowed significantly, inducing many officers

¹J. Hoegaerts, 'Benevolent fathers and virile brothers: Metaphors of kinship and age in the nineteenth-century Belgian Army', *Low Countries Historical Review*, vol. 127, no. 1 (2012), p. 84.

to 'sell-out' to the commercial opportunities in the Congo during the 1880s and 1890s. The duel, outlawed in 1841, became one of the few traditions that perpetuated a fast-declining sense of military *esprit de corps*, separating soldiers from civilian life. The lack of efficiently enforced repressive measures outraged large sections of society who began to throw increasingly heavy criticism in the army's direction as it moved into the twentieth century. Unpopular initiatives, such as the prospective introduction of conscription, only galvanised regional tensions fought out in linguistic and political terms. The army, its officer corps included, became somewhat of a crucible for many of the nation's social problems—meaning that the early confidence in professionalism was largely absent by the eve of the First World War. In the words of the French military attaché in 1914 it resembled 'an officer corps of a nation of businessmen'.²

When the Provisional Government decided to reorganise the army into a more regular force in October 1830, they called on all Belgian officers to return 'home' to command it. A promise of increased rank saw 402 of them return from Dutch service and a further 21 from overseas by 1834. They were supported by some 1,088 volunteer officers elected during the Revolution and 1,107 men promoted from the ranks since 1830.³ As a body it lacked experience, as even many returning from Dutch service were but junior officers, creating a void at the top of the command structure. This was a result of a calculated Dutch policy, which saw the Royal Army possess just 10 Belgian-born generals out of 76 and 9 General Staff officers out of 43 by 1830. In the infantry and cavalry, only 20.1% of officers were of Belgian origin, while technical arms saw their proportions reduced to just 8.6%. In total, only 417 of the 2,377 Dutch officer corps hailed from the southern provinces despite the region furnishing more than half of the rank-and-file's manpower.⁴ The Military Schools at Delft and Breda only allocated a small proportion of places annually to Belgian officers, with courses in Dutch severely curtailing opportunities. In particular, this led to a shortage of experience in the technical arms and the cavalry after the

² A. Duchesne, 'Appréciations français sur la valeur de l'armée belge et les perspectives de guerre de 1871 à 1914', *Carnet de la Fourragère*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1961), pp. 204–205.

³ *Moniteur Belge*, 25 December 1834.

⁴ É. Wanty, *Le Milieu Militaire Belge de 1831 à 1914* (Palais des Académies, Brussels, 1957), pp. 6–7.

Revolution, and was the main driving force behind King Leopold I's decision to enlist the services of French and Polish officers.⁵

The results of this initiative had a striking influence on the composition of the early officer corps. In 1835 only 70.1% of the army's officers were of Belgian origin.⁶ Yet, it was not the cavalry that boasted the greatest number of foreigners but the infantry (17.2% compared to 32.9%). In large part, this was because of the 58 French officers found in the infantry, many of whom had been detached from the Army of the North that had helped rid Belgium of the Dutch presence. In total, this avenue of expertise furnished some 49 of the 77 French officers serving in 1835.⁷ Additionally, the number of foreign officers entering the army, and particularly the infantry, came through the Revolution's volunteer corps. These ad hoc forces numbered many foreigners among their ranks, particularly in the foreign-raised units such as the London and Paris Legions. Whereas the infantry comprised 66.3% of volunteers, the cavalry counted a mere 9.1%. Seeing as these corps were mostly foot units and later amalgamated to form the basis of the *Chasseurs à Pied* regiments, with their officers allowed to retain their rank and station within them, the above-average proportion of non-nationals in the infantry is not wholly surprising. By 1845, however, the army had begun to stabilise and the proportion of Belgian officers had jumped from 70.2% in 1835 to 83.9%. Over time, the officer corps continued to discard its foreigners to the point where, by 1905, it was comprised of 96.8% Belgians.

⁵ For more detail on this, see Chap. 2.

⁶ All figures quoted, unless otherwise stated, come from the author's own database compiled from information on the Matriculation Sheets of officers from two infantry, one cavalry, one artillery, and one engineer regiments taken at 10-year intervals starting in 1835. The regiments used were the 2nd Chasseurs à Pied; 12th Line Regiment, 1st Lancers; 4th Regiment of Artillery; and the Regiment of Engineers. Because the artillery and engineers were not organised into individual regiments as early as 1835, figures for this arm only begin in 1845. These documents are held at the Musée Royal de l'Armée (MRA) and include boxes 1–52. *Belgian* is taken to mean anyone born in Belgium to Belgian parents (including the ceded parts of Limburg and Luxembourg for 1835 figures) or abroad to Belgian parents. Naturalised Belgians or those born in Belgium to foreign parents are not considered intrinsically nationals for the purposes of this study.

⁷ J. R. Leconte, *La Formation Historique de l'Armée Belge: Les Officiers Étrangers au service de la Belgique (1830–1853)* (Imprimerie des papeteries de Genval, Paris & Brussels, 1949), pp. 146–147.

Although this process of Belgification was duly welcomed by the army and the nation, the problems of creating an homogenous corps of officers with battlefield experience and technical expertise proved challenging in a neutral state. Certainly, many officers of the 1830s had seen action during the Ten Days' Campaign, but the success of a future army would depend on providing the newest subalterns with the latest in military thought and practical application. Knowledge could be taught, as would be the case from 1834 onwards through the creation of the *École Militaire*, but true understanding, deriving from personal experience, proved more difficult to come by.

The annual manoeuvres held at the Beverloo camp after 1835 were a step in the right direction and allowed the army to experiment with ideas and influences not only from France, given the influence exerted by French officers, but also latterly from Germany, Britain, and Russia.⁸ More significantly, they gave officers the opportunity to handle large formations over extended areas, much to the admiration of foreign observers.⁹ Despite its utility in teaching the young army and its officers the basics of battlefield discipline, Beverloo and its training facilities could not replicate the chaos and urgency of battle that was deemed so important to the professional soldier across Europe and that was craved so urgently by the young subaltern seeking adventure and the glories of war.

One way around the problem was to allow periods of extended leave to a certain number of officers to either be detached to a foreign army on campaign or to take part in one of Belgium's overseas expeditions. The law did not permit Belgians to serve in other armies without the loss of nationality, but it did provide leeway in the form of allowing officers to serve on 'missions and special services' while still technically remaining on the establishment. This ensured that officers on 'mission' would neither lose their rank nor seniority. Through this loophole, and while carefully balancing the mantle of a perpetually neutral state, a number of officers saw service in Portugal, Spain, and Algeria to name but a few in the 20-year period following independence.

⁸J. Hoegaerts, *Masculinity and Nationhood, 1830–1910: Constructions of Identity and Citizenship in Belgium* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014), p. 80.

⁹B. Dierckx and J. Hoegaerts, 'Exercising Neutrality: The Practice of Manoeuvres in the Belgian Army before the Great War', *Journal of Belgian History*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2016), pp. 27–33.

The Algerian experience was granted to 24 Belgian officers detached to the French Army between 1840 and 1851. These officers, although sent to learn the art of campaigning at close quarters, were often charged with a dual mission of assessing the suitability for the establishment of a Belgian commercial enclave to aid the national economy.¹⁰ Early reports back to Belgium contained information on the ‘mortal’ climate, tactics, supplies, and French brutalities to keep the local tribes in check.¹¹ Many took part in action too, and with great distinction. The *Moniteur Belge* reported that the Duc D’Orleans said of them:

The Belgian officers have worthily represented their country. They were seen at the head of cavalry charges, leading the infantry attack up the Teniah hill, whilst also in advanced positions engaged in fire-fights and grappling with the Arabs’.¹²

Even greater praise was ascribed by General Dampierre when addressing the Belgian Major Lahure, stating: ‘Were I permitted to remove my *Croix d’Honneur* and attach it to your breast, I would do it instantly as it could not be worn more worthily’.¹³ The *Legion d’Honneur* was subsequently conferred on four Belgian officers: Lahure, Vandervreken, Gillain, and Nalinne. After their return to Belgium, it was not uncommon for these officers to be greeted with regimental banquets to celebrate their exploits but possibly also to revere the few men in the officer corps with recent campaigning experience.¹⁴

Only a limited number of officers managed to gain experience through service abroad, and it was clear that a successful army would need a more consistent influx of similarly trained men imbued with a martial *esprit de corps* to command its regiments. As previously mentioned, the answer was to be found in the creation of the *École Militaire*. Initially, the institution

¹⁰ *Moniteur Belge*, 18 July 1845. The idea was to send a few starving Flemish families following the 1840s famine, which had hit the region hard, in order to settle and develop commercial opportunities; *La Vedette*, 30 April 1847. See also J. R. Leconte, *Les Tentatives d’Expansion Coloniale sous le Règne de Léopold 1er* (V. Van Dieren & Co, Antwerp, 1946).

¹¹ MRA, Fonds Belgische Militaire Aanwezigheid in het Buitenlaand (1826–1955)—hereafter Belgian Military Abroad: Algeria IV/2-3, Memo on the Expedition to Medea. General Considerations on War in Africa, 25 June 1840; and IV/3, Report to Minister of War, 3 March 1841.

¹² *Moniteur Belge*, 3 June 1840.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2 August 1840.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8 and 30 September 1840.

was designed to furnish qualified artillery, engineers, and staff officers through a heavily scientific- and mathematical-based curriculum that mirrored courses given at the French institutions of St Cyr and Metz. Admission criteria required candidates to be born or naturalised Belgians; aged between 16 and 20; speak French; have a general knowledge of history and geography, including an intimate knowledge of that of Belgium; draw well; and possess good handwriting. Once enrolled, students underwent two years of general study before specialising in one of the three branches offered—the brightest tended to opt for the General Staff. Notwithstanding its attempt at creating a professionalised corps of staff officers, the *École Militaire* only managed to produce an average of between two and three per year prior to the creation of the staff college (*École de Guerre*) in 1869.¹⁵ The weakest students often passed straight into the infantry and cavalry, though a steady stream of officers applying to the less technical arms did not start until 1841. Attempts were made in 1837 and 1838 to introduce infantry- and cavalry-specific courses, even though mobilisation to face the Dutch threat had delayed its implementation. After running rather irregularly during the 1840s, these courses became more regular additions, which, in conjunction with the annual artillery, engineer, and staff cohorts, formed a wider base of qualified officers to disperse throughout the army.

Indeed, if a study of the army's professionalisation over the course of the nineteenth century is undertaken, the increasing importance of a military education becomes evident. From just 3.3% in 1835, the proportion of officers with *École Militaire* qualifications, or a foreign equivalent, rose to 39.1% by 1865. Following the expansion of military education facilities to include the *École de Guerre*, these figures soared to 60% by 1895.¹⁶ The significant jump between 1885 and 1895 can be explained in terms of a 'changing of the guard' within the officer corps, where many officers whose careers had begun during the 1840s and 1850s—largely without a

¹⁵ W. Simons (ed.), *L'Institut Royal Supérieur de Défense: une Longue et Magnifique Histoire 1830–1995* (Koninklijk Hoger Instituut voor Defensie, Defensie Studiecencentrum, Brussels, 1995), pp. 20–21. For further reading regarding the *École Militaire*, see V. Deguise, *Histoire de l'Ecole Militaire de la Belgique* (Polleunis et Ceuterick, Brussels, 1895); M. Hayez (ed.), *Histoire de l'Ecole Militaire 1834–1934* (Brussels, 1935).

¹⁶ It is worth noting, however, that the opening of the *École de Guerre* in 1869 had only a minimal effect on the increase in the figures beyond this date, as very few officers went solely through this institution. The majority had already qualified from the *École Militaire* and, as such, were only counted once in the data collection.

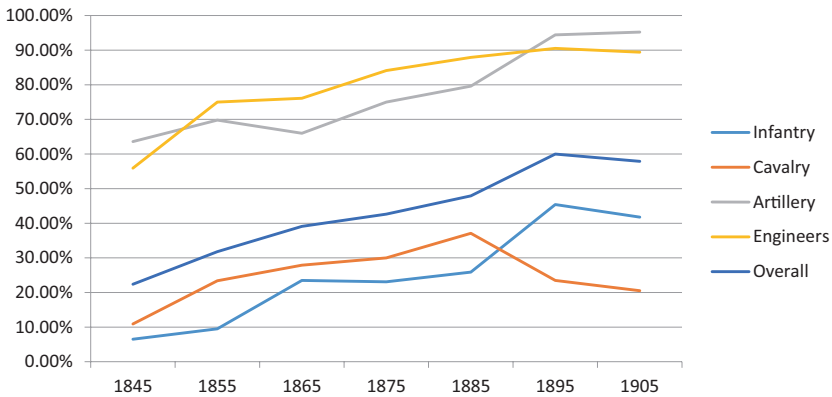


Fig. 3.1 Percentage of officers with a military education, 1845–1905

military education—were replaced by successive cohorts (*promotions*) of *École Militaire* graduates. This was particularly the case for the artillery and the engineers for which professional training became almost a prerequisite to a commission. This can be seen when comparing the army's overall percentage of men with military educations to those of the technical arms alone (see Fig. 3.1). By 1905, 95.2% of artillery officers and 89.4% of engineer officers had passed through Belgium's academies. By contrast, the infantry and cavalry constantly struggled to keep pace, largely disproving Guy Van Gorp's assertion that officers emanating from the *École Militaire* showed strong preferences to join these arms between 1855 and 1924.¹⁷

The proportion of officers who joined the artillery is hardly surprising given the importance attributed to mathematics in the entrance examinations. A candidate's aptitude for arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and trigonometry far outweighed their ability to sit the other papers. These included, in order of weighting: French, Latin, German, English, History and Geography, Dutch, and Drawing.¹⁸ Despite this, of the 26 students in

¹⁷ G. Van Gorp, 'Le Recrutement et la Formation des Candidats Officier de Carrière à l'Armée Belge' (Ph.D. Thesis, Université Catholique de Louvain, 1969), pp. 47–48.

¹⁸ MRA Fonds Moscou 818, Nerenburger to Goethals, 7 January 1867. Mathematics (weighted 20) was taken as written and oral examinations and split into two sections: arithmetic and algebra and geometry and trigonometry. Both required an average pass mark of 10, which equated to five marks for each of the two sections. French (weighted 10) required

the 16th infantry and cavalry *promotion* who sought admission to the *section spéciale* to study and qualify for the artillery in their final year, only the top 16 were deemed to have the ‘capacity, intelligence and knowledge’ to follow it.¹⁹ This came only ten weeks after General Nerenburger, Commander of the *École Militaire*, had written to the Minister of War saying that this group of students would provide excellent officers for the army following an average examination mark of 13.81 out of 20.

What is more revealing still is the desire among such a strong *promotion* to seek out the academically rigorous path to a commission in the technical arms. Perhaps, the stringent entrance examinations were predisposed to favour those seeking to put their scientific interests to good use. Nevertheless, equally probable is that aspiring officers in a neutral, largely meritocratic army were more likely to be the academic bourgeois type than the ‘officer gentlemen’ of the more socially exclusive regiments in the British and German Armies.²⁰ This only increased as time went on and goes some way to explaining the reason why the artillery became so well represented with *École Militaire* graduates as the century wore on. Indeed, so competitive was it to join the artillery by 1891 that even students who had qualified for it were told that there were not enough places available, and that they would have to be commissioned into a different branch of the service.²¹ This left the artillery in the enviable position by the turn of the century of being able to select the most accomplished cadets emanating from the *École Militaire*.

a pass mark of 8, Latin (weighted 6) a pass mark of 5, German (weighted 5) a pass mark of 5, English (weighted 5) a pass mark of 6, History and Geography (weighted 4) a pass mark of 5, Dutch (weighted 3) a pass mark of 7, and Drawing (weighted 1) had no pass mark attributed to it.

¹⁹ Ibid., Nerenburger to Goethals, 13 May 1867.

²⁰ Some opposition to overly professionalising the British officer corps through military institutions at the expense of gentlemanly virtues can be seen in H. Strachan, *Wellington's Legacy: The Reform of the British Army 1830–54* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984), pp. 126–141; E. M. Spiers, *The Army and Society 1815–1914* (Longman Group Ltd., London, 1980), pp. 1–29; D. French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, and the British People c.1870–2000* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005), pp. 149–170. For the German case, see M. Kitchen, *The German Officer Corps 1890–1914* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1968), pp. 25–31. For the academic revival in the French Army during the 1870s, see D. Porch, *The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871–1914* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981), pp. 40–41.

²¹ MRA Fonds Moscou 818, De Tilly to Cousebandt d'Alkemade, 18 February 1891.

The *École de Guerre* similarly placed a heavy emphasis on the scientific aspects of military education. A quick glance at the breakdown of subjects by number of lessons taught during a student's first year in 1874 shows that 182 hours were devoted to the arts and 298 to maths and science.²² Naturally, the establishment of this course in 1869 saw the staff course at the *École Militaire* abandoned. From this point onwards, all staff officers would have to pass through the *École de Guerre*, whose admission process was deemed far more in touch with current military affairs than its predecessor. The new specialised institution, in contrast to the *École Militaire*, only selected candidates who had already spent a minimum of three years with a regiment and had learned the ropes of military life. Criticism had previously been levelled at the old system whereby officers were admitted to the staff course before they had spent any time in the army and would subsequently pass straight into the staff corps without any regimental experience. This, it was feared, had created a distant and detached group of officers at the head of the military establishment.

Indeed, the idea of exclusivity within the officer corps, and particularly those graduating from the military's educational institutions, became increasingly prevalent throughout the nineteenth century. It was suggested that a military caste was in the process of detaching itself from civil society, as well as from the values of equality of opportunity that were so pivotal to the concept of Belgian nationality. This manifested itself in the debate surrounding the roles of the *École des Cadets* and the *Écoles des Pupilles*—Belgium's equivalent to the Duke of York's Royal Military School. The former, established in 1897, admitted children of officers with the sole purpose of preparing them for entrance to the *École Militaire*. The latter, formed in 1838, accepted children from families with any military or civil service background, and attempted to provide the army with trained NCOs.

A number did manage to obtain commissions as officers, with some (e.g., Jean J. A. Wendelen of the 12th Line Infantry Regiment and Armand De Ceuninck) achieving notable success by rising to the rank of Lieutenant-General—albeit with the aid of having passed through the *École Militaire* en route.²³ This difference in eligibility proved unpopular in the Chamber

²² Ibid., 4113, *École de Guerre*, Programme of Lessons, 1874.

²³ For more information regarding the *École des Pupilles* under its various guises over the course of the nineteenth century, see Y. P. Van Renthgem, *Enfants de Troupe, Pupilles, et Cadets de l'Armée de 1838 à 1945* (Musée Royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire Militaire/Koninklijk Museum Van Het Leger Van De Krijgsgeschiedenis, Brussels, 2000).

of Representatives, with many vocal critics condemning the *École des Cadets* as an 'anti-democratic' institution creating an isolated pool of officers from which the army would draw.²⁴ Indeed, the radical representative for Liège, Charles Magnette, proclaimed his disgust at the *Cours Centrale's* decision in 1897 to give precedence to sons with military backgrounds by stating: 'We are stopping the democratic recruitment of officers to the army. We are aiming, it would seem, to create a new caste, to hand over the golden epaulets hereditarily'.²⁵ A decade later, members were still opposing the same injustices, with one saying: 'I struggle to understand this distinction between castes in a democratic country such as Belgium, where the most modest of means ought to be able, through their own merit, to attain the highest positions available'.²⁶ This would seem to infer two things. First, that by the turn of the century, the officer corps was becoming an insular institution in its own right, formed around the military academies and the practices and values taught within them. Second, that social barriers were preventing a number of talented men from working their way to the highest ranks of the army, which itself was becoming an increasingly detached enclave from wider society.

Nevertheless, an examination of the military experience of the officer corps would suggest in fact that many officers had spent time in, and been promoted through, the ranks. As such, the argument put forward for exclusivity within the officer corps is somewhat tenuous, especially when it is considered that several NCOs were admitted alongside other candidates into the *École Militaire*. Clearly, the army was heavily laden with remnants of the Revolution during its formative years. Some 51.4% of officers in 1835 could lay claim to involvement as a volunteer or as an officer in one of the many *corps francs* of 1830, and 62% as rankers in a regular force—some experienced both. Meanwhile only 19.9% had previous experience as regular officers. Therefore, the basis of the Belgian Army's officer corps was very inclusive. Even though the numbers of volunteers and men who had held commissions in other armies naturally fell away with the passage of time, the proportion of Belgian officers being promoted from the ranks remained remarkably high throughout the century. Indeed, in 1905, 58.7% of

²⁴ P.P.R., 13 May 1897.

²⁵ Ibid., 14 May 1897.

²⁶ Ibid., 13 December 1907.

officers had come from the ranks, leaving only the remaining 41.3% as the so-called military caste that passed straight through the *École Militaire* without any previous experience. Most of this latter category passed into the technical arms, too, leaving the infantry and cavalry heavily reliant on the ranks to fill their officer cadres.

There is scant information regarding the occupations of officers or their fathers in the available records, which makes an accurate social composition difficult to calculate. The figures produced by Kris Quanten, however, point to the dominance of the bourgeoisie (specifically the petit bourgeoisie) alongside men of lower social standing.²⁷ This corresponds with the consistently high number of promotions from the ranks that set the Belgian officer corps apart from most of its European counterparts. Although there certainly was a smattering of nobility present in the Belgian officer corps, it was not comparable to those of other European armies of the same period in either numbers or standing. For example, the British Army raised no more than 5% from the ranks but retained upwards of 30% from the landed aristocracy and gentry.²⁸ The Prussian officer corps was 65% aristocrat in 1860 and, despite societal changes influencing its composition, retained 30% by 1913.²⁹ If anything, the Belgian Army resembled the French Revolutionary armies to a far greater extent, whose willingness to promote local elites and professional men of good standing together with NCOs (recruited through the same ballot system) had been fuelled by a similar sense of equality of opportunity as reigned in Belgium.³⁰ This demonstrates the

²⁷ K. J. Quanten, 'De officieren van het Belgische leger in de negentiende eeuw: een historisch-sociologische benadering' (Unpublished Masters' Thesis, Vrije Universiteit, Brussels, 1999), pp. 87–89.

²⁸ Spiers, *Army and Society*, pp. 2–4 and 7–9; E. M. Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army 1868–1902* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1992), pp. 94–95.

²⁹ Kitchen, *German Officer Corps*, p. 22; U. Trumpener, 'Junkers and Others: The Rise of Commoners in the Prussian Army, 1871–1914', *Canadian Journal of History*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1979), pp. 30–34. For other armies, see I. Deák, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848–1918* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990), pp. 160–164; E. Willis Brooks, 'The Russian Military Press in the Reform Era', in D. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye and B.W. Menning (eds.), *Reforming the Tsar's Army: Military Innovation in Imperial Russia from Peter the Great to the Revolution* (Woodrow Wilson Centre Press & Cambridge University Press, Washington, DC & Cambridge, 2004), p. 121.

³⁰ R. Blaufarb, *The French Army 1750–1820: Careers, Talent, Merit* (Manchester University Press, Manchester & New York, 2002), pp. 91–95 and 104–105; Porch, *March to the Marne*, pp. 17–18.

extent to which the revolutionary spirit persisted in Belgium into the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or at least that a sense of military entitlement and obligation was not as pronounced among its nobility as elsewhere in Europe. Rather, the 'old' nobility gradually retreated from public affairs as they sought new avenues of investment, while the 'new' nobility (there were 220 ennoblements during the reigns of Leopold I and Leopold II) preferred to build on their successes in commerce and industry.³¹ Indeed, even the notion of an officer caste, from any social background, was not entirely being established through successive generations of *École Militaire* graduates.

This was not to say that some of its practices did not portray the officer corps as out of touch or insular. The continued use of the duel to propagate a military *esprit de corps* was one such example. Despite being outlawed in 1841, the duel was a means through which the army could distance itself from civilian life and promote its own honour code that was inexorably linked with military performance. In this way, a distinct, all-encompassing officer caste, ex-rankers or not, that played by its own rules, did manifest itself to the chagrin of the nation. Indeed, the *École Militaire* published a directive in the early 1880s that effectively condoned duelling.³² This was supported by an officer writing in *La Chronique* who claimed that it was an evil, but a necessary evil in order to guarantee the continued courteous relations between officers without resorting to verbal insults or brawls.³³ Both the press and the increasingly agitated politicians disparaged these arguments, along with the concept that it fashioned military effectiveness. They often pointed to Britain as an example of an army with military prowess that was beyond question but yet had dispensed with the archaic brutality of the duel.³⁴ Yet, in the model army of the age, Prussian officers considered the upholding of their code of honour through the duel preserved their exclusive position within the state and created an homogenous corps with a corporate attitude to life that rightly distinguished them

³¹ S. Clark, 'Nobility, Bourgeoisie and the Industrial Revolution in Belgium', *Past and Present*, no. 105 (1994), pp. 152–169; V. Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See from Gregory XVI to Pius IX (1831–1859), Catholic Revival, Society and Politics in 19th-Century Europe* (Institut Historique Belge de Rome, Brussels & Rome, 2001), p. 165.

³² P.P.R., 7 December 1886.

³³ *La Chronique*, 13 September 1893.

³⁴ *Journal d'Ypres*, 27 August 1890; P.P.R., 7 December 1886.

from the civilian population.³⁵ Two issues were particularly galling: first, it was a practice imposed on officers and NCOs alike under the banner of a military code of conduct; and second, reprisals were never properly enforced. The implication that the army could act above the law could not be countenanced. On every occasion that a new report of a death or injury was circulated, these two parallel issues brought the perceived barbaric military culture into sharp public focus.

The first of these issues, concerning the army's stance on duelling to maintain an *esprit de corps*, which separated them from their civilian counterparts, engendered a heightened sense of humanitarianism among large sections of society. The case of NCO Léon Edouard Vinchant, who was reminded by his superiors that he was duty-bound to defend his honour or risk the ridicule and stigma of being branded a coward, highlights the pressures often imposed on men within the army. Vinchant sustained significant injuries that forced him to quit the service, leaving him unable to work in civilian life. Critics condemned the fact that, upon a request for a pension compensating his injuries, the Minister of War denied him the right on account of his wounds not being contracted due to his service in the army. This prompted one deputy to exclaim in the Chamber of Representatives that Vinchant was a 'victim of an institution which common law condemns [...] but that is glorified, exalted and imposed by military culture'. He added that any other soldier in the same position refusing to fight 'would be ostracised from the army, and under the weight of general disapproval would soon feel forced to leave'.³⁶

Despite this, however, the army continued to take the law into its own hands. Sanctions for being involved in a duel could see an officer land a nominal fine of £25 when brought before a military tribunal; although more often than not the penalty for not participating was far higher. A case brought up in the Chamber reflected this point perfectly. A captain in the mid-1880s had dined well one night and proceeded to a café to round off his evening. There he was confronted by a man who ridiculed him, which the latter promptly laughed off, taking it all in good humour. Yet, after hearing that he had not demanded to uphold his honour by duelling with the civilian, a military council called the officer with 27 years of service in front of them and summarily forced him to leave the army—all because he

³⁵ Kitchen, *German Officer Corps*, pp. 49–50.

³⁶ P.P.R., 17 February 1882.

had respected the civil law by which he was also bound.³⁷ In this respect, Belgium's was no different from other European armies.³⁸ Honour codes were seemingly as important in the Belgium bourgeois officer corps as they were in other armies with stronger aristocratic traditions. It was this sort of contempt for the law that prompted many quarters to call for clarification as to where the army stood in relation to it.

The question was put to the Minister of War as to whether duelling ought to be allowed in the army. If not, then calls to unequivocally and uncompromisingly enforce the law would be made to ensure that the army was not a law unto itself. When discussed in 1903, Socialist deputies, in the form of Émile Vandervelde and Georges Lorand, expressed their outrage and disgust at the archaic practice and refused to accept the Minister of War's evasive reply that suggested duelling in the army had largely ceased and that 'honour councils' had sat since 1889 exclusively to resolve disputes without recourse to violence.³⁹ Indeed, the general feeling against duelling ran so strongly in most quarters around the turn of the century that 'The Belgian League Against the Duel' was established in Brussels in 1903. It aimed to reduce the frequency of duelling, not only in Belgium but also across Europe in both military and civilian milieus. It was undeniably the evident frustration of the latter's opinion in Belgium, however, that concerned politicians. Public opinion was well expressed by the *Journal d'Ypres*, when it printed this: 'The army, in which all of our children serve, is a part of a greater national family, and our primary interest, like our primary wish, is that we teach them to respect the law of God'.⁴⁰

This was not the only instance where army and society collided, far from it. Additionally, it was not the only *École Militaire*-influenced directive to highlight wider divisions within the nation. As early as 1835, Flemish newspapers were castigating the school for the already seemingly pro-French and pro-Walloon stance it took with regard to entrance criteria. *Le Messager de Gand* wrote:

We note the imposed obligation upon candidates to know the French language, and even take examinations in this tongue. Notwithstanding this, it is noticeable that Flemish, the language of three quarters of the Belgian

³⁷ Ibid., 7 December 1886.

³⁸ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, pp. 126–127.

³⁹ *Journal d'Ypres*, 23 March 1903.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 27 August 1890.

population, is not even mentioned in the Minister's orders. Therefore, students who have completed their primary education in establishments based in the two Flanders, Antwerp, Limburg and Brabant, where studies are conducted in Flemish, will not be able to apply for entry to the *École Militaire*.⁴¹

Far from being reactionary in its approach, this article was formed on the basis of hard facts, which even three decades later had not significantly changed. Indeed, the importance weighting attributed to French over Flemish in the entrance examinations in 1867 was eight to three.⁴² Meanwhile, the prerequisite of proficiency in French at the *École de Guerre* was equally obvious because French Literature was taught instead of French Language, though Flemish Language was a course unto itself. Tellingly, Flemish Language was taught for 30 hours during the entire year, the same as German and only 10 hours more than English.⁴³

Language use in the Belgian Army is a sensitive and extremely complicated issue, and not without its methodological problems. Quite apart from anything else, regional dialects were not formalised into either a standardised Flemish or Walloon-French language until well into the nineteenth century, making it difficult to engage with language as a defined entity. Equally, there are few, if any, traces of an officer's primary language of use that remain in either the service records or matriculation forms. This has made evaluations of language in the Belgian Army particularly difficult for historians, who have been forced to accept the limitations of the available sources or, alternatively, explore the legislative aspects, which are better documented.⁴⁴

Although some studies have been known to simply state the place of birth as an indicator of linguistic leaning, research for this book has attempted to compute a more exact composition of the officer corps

⁴¹ *Le Messager de Gand*, 20 April 1835.

⁴² MRA Fonds Moscou 818, Nerenburger to Goethals, 7 January 1867.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Fonds Moscou 4113, *École de Guerre*, Programme of Lessons 1874.

⁴⁴ See R. Boijen, *De Taalwetgeving in het Belgische Leger (1830–1940)* (Musée Royal de l'Armée/Koninklijk Legersmuseum, Brussels, 1992), and 'Het Leger als Smeltkroes van de Natie?', *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis*, no. 3 (1997), pp. 55–70; F. E. Stevens, 'De Samenstelling van het 9de Linieregiment tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog (1914–1918)', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 21, no. 7 (1976), pp. 681–722; H. Keymuelen and L. De Vos, 'Een Definitieve Afrekening met de 80% – Mythe? Het Belgische Leger (1914–1918) en de Sociale Numerieke Taalverhoudingen onder de Gesneuvelden van Lagere Rang', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 27, no. 8 (1988), pp. 589–612, vol. 28, no. 1 (1989), pp. 1–37; and vol. 28, no. 2 (1989), pp. 81–104.

through the added use of statistical data taken from the census records of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These records give an accurate breakdown as of 1866 by town and province of the languages spoken by the male population, including bilingualism among the three main languages spoken (Flemish and French, Flemish and German, and French and German). When combined with data of officers' birthplace, calculations can be made to obtain a more accurate estimation of the likelihood of primary languages in use, considering not only regional variations but even differences within towns. In recognising that this method contains some limitations, it offers a better grasp of the proportion of likely primary French, Flemish, German, and bilingual speakers within each regiment sampled.

Although regional tensions and the language issue simmered throughout the course of the nineteenth century, it was not until the mid-1880s that strong calls for language equality in the army truly took root. The debate in the public domain was largely fought out in the press and the Chamber of Representatives in the three decades preceding the First World War, where claims of Flemish subjugation at the hands of a Walloon minority were aired.⁴⁵ This occurred for several reasons, both social and military. First, a codified language for Flanders did not appear until 1864 with the publication of the Matthias de Vries-Jan te Winkel dictionary, which made the *Flamingant* movement's aim to raise the Dutch language's profile a fairly moot point beforehand.⁴⁶ As the franchise extension of 1893 saw the number of electors jump from 135,000 to 1,370,687, the need for political parties to present Flemish-speaking candidates offered opportunities for linguistic settlements that finally resulted in the equality law of 1898.⁴⁷ As such it was not until this point that a true 'Flemish question' appeared; the only one concerning the authorities in the mid-nineteenth century was how to reverse the socioeconomic disaster that had left Flanders destitute.⁴⁸ Militarily, too, the battle for general service

⁴⁵ P.P.R., 22 May 1913.

⁴⁶ S. B. Clough, *A History of the Flemish Movement in Belgium: A Study in Nationalism* (Octagon Books Inc., New York, 1968), pp. 79–80.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 135–136. The 1893 Law ushered in a plural voting system for adult males based on the *cens* denoting financial and social standing through contributions to State. It saw 60% of the electoral body receive three votes, 23% receive two votes, and 17% receive one vote.

⁴⁸ B. De Wever, 'The Case of the Dutch-Speaking Belgians in the Nineteenth Century', in P. Broomans et al. (eds.), *The Beloved Mother tongue: Ethnolinguistic Nationalism in Small*

(universal conscription) that would see a greater number of Flemish soldiers join the colours under the stewardship of a majority French-speaking officer corps, only reached its nadir between 1909 and 1913, further demonstrating the delayed nature of the debate.

Perhaps, less widely appreciated however, is the continuous decline in Flemish-speaking officers towards the turn of the century from what had previously been, if not an equal footing, at least a healthy proportion of commissions in all branches of the service. Indeed, an examination of the overall linguistic breakdown in Fig. 3.2,⁴⁹ demonstrates this point quite clearly. Whereas the proportion of French-speaking officers was constantly higher than their proportion of the population, which largely stood at between 35% and 40%, it was only accentuated by the sharp decline of Flemish-speaking officers towards the last quarter of the century.

In many ways this corresponds with Quanten's findings, in which he also suggests that French-speakers predominated. Basing the linguistic composition of the 275-strong sample on birthplace alone, however, does not reveal the full extent of the shifting dynamics of the situation over time. Rather than Flemish speakers increasing their influence within the officer corps from 26% in 1847 to 34% in 1880, they were on the decline.⁵⁰ From a high point of 40.2% of primary Flemish speakers in 1845 (albeit without data for bilinguals that Quanten suggests was broadly 25% in

Nations: Inventories and Reflections (Peeters, Leuven, Paris & Dudley, MA, 2008), pp. 55–56.

⁴⁹Data was computed from the author's database and statistics obtained from Belgium's Ministry of Interior, *Statistique Générale de la Belgique. Exposé de la Situation du Royaume (Période Décennale de 1841–1850)* (Brussels, 1852); *Période Décennale de 1861–1870* (Brussels, 1872) Title II; *Statistique de la Belgique. Population. Recensement général de 1846, 1866, 1880, and 1900*. Even though it is understood that all officers were required to speak French, this chart seeks to demonstrate the primary language used at home. It must be noted that the 1846 census did not have an option for bilingualism and as such officers' primary language was based on the majority of the commune from which they came. Equally, the 1846 census is based on the male population in its entirety, the 1866 and 1880 censuses on the male population above the age of two, and the 1900 census on the male population above the age of 15, adding yet further precision. It included all men born in Belgium to Belgian parents only. For more on the use of statistical data from Belgian census records, see A. R. Zolberg, 'The Making of Flemings and Walloons: Belgium: 1830–1914', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1974), pp. 179–235; P. Levy, 'La Statistique des Langues en Belgique', *Revue de l'Institut de Sociologie*, vol. 18, no. 3 (1938), pp. 507–570.

⁵⁰Quanten, 'De officieren van het Belgische leger', p. 61.

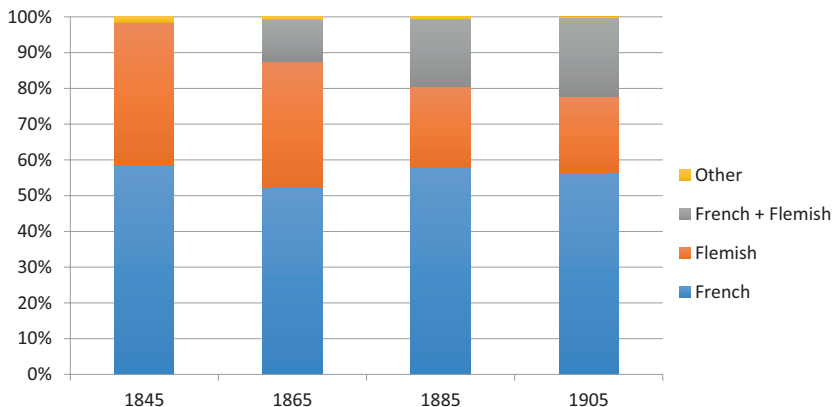


Fig. 3.2 Percentages of languages spoken by Belgian-born officers, 1845–1905

1847), their presence fell to 35.2% in 1865, to only 22.4% by 1885. Meanwhile, the proportion of officers with French as their mother tongue remained relatively constant, hovering between 52.3% and 58.3%. This shift over time was because of an increase in bilingualism in the two main languages, although at the expense of native Flemish as opposed to native French speakers. Admittedly, Flemings had consistently been underrepresented, especially when considering that, prior to the 1850s, French officers partially made up for the deficit in numbers. Clearly, however, there was a higher proportion of native Flemish-speaking officers up to the late nineteenth century than had hitherto been acknowledged. Similarly, it is no surprise that the language issues in the army entered both military and public consciousness as of the 1880s, with the proportion of primary Flemish-speaking officers declining more noticeably to a point where they constituted no more than 21.2% by 1905.

When considering a breakdown by arm, a similar pattern emerges, though with some notable differences. Despite some fluctuations, it is interesting to note that a relatively steady flow of Flemish officers into the technical arms was maintained, despite accusations that they were being deprived of suitable opportunities to enter the *École Militaire*. Flemish representation in the technical arms generally mirrored or outpaced its overall average in the army (see Tables 3.1 and 3.2). This meant that the overall decline in Flemish-speaking officers stemmed from an

Table 3.1 Percentages of Primary Flemish-Speaking Officers in the Army Overall and in Technical Arms, 1845–1905

<i>Arm</i>	1845 (%)	1865 (%)	1885 (%)	1905 (%)
Overall	40.2	35.1	22.4	21.2
Technical arms	49.0	32.6	24.3	27.8

Table 3.2 Cumulative Percentages of Primary Flemish-Speaking and Naturally Bilingual Officers in the Army Overall and in Technical Arms, 1865–1905

<i>Arm</i>	1845	1865 (%)	1885 (%)	1905 (%)
Overall	–	46.8	41.4	43.3
Technical arms	–	44.4	47.2	54.76

increasingly severe underrepresentation in the infantry and cavalry as the century wore on. Infantry percentages of primary Flemish speakers fell from a high of 37.1% in 1865 to 15.5% by 1905. Similarly, the cavalry's proportion dropped from 32% to 25.5% over the same period.

What this demonstrates is that the perceived obstacles barring the progression of non-native French speakers from studying at the *École Militaire* were not as important as may well have been imagined. A knowledge of French was, nevertheless, required and the high proportion of Flemish officers entering the technical arms was a testament to the ambitious few who sought to advance their careers in the more prestigious corps. An acceptance of French as the language of mobility for a small minority, at least, can indeed go some way to explaining the significant increase in bilingual officers by the start of twentieth century. It reflects the civil situation of the Flemish *petit-bourgeoisie* in middle-management jobs who were confronted with similar obstacles.⁵¹ As previously mentioned, the figures suggest that a significant proportion of these were actually Flemings learning French as opposed to Walloons learning Flemish—a telling fact that did not go unnoticed.

This desire to learn the opposite region's language, however, was not shared by the Walloon community according to the *Flamingant* movement. It was argued that, with the proposed introduction of general service in 1913 likely to increase Flanders' proportion of the rank and file

⁵¹ De Wever, 'Dutch-Speaking Belgians', pp. 55–56.

to roughly 65%, there was no good excuse for Walloon officers to remain ignorant of the importance of Flemish. The point was made that ‘in a country of 3 million people who only speak Flemish, a big national institution like the army, cannot ignore this language’.⁵² A complete overhaul of the officer corps was out of the question, naturally, because the Flemish–Walloon ratio could not be brought into line with their respective proportions of the population without significant consequences. As a result, Flemish representatives pushed for their language to feature more prominently in military education, mirroring their civilian policies.

Indeed, Jean-Baptiste Coomans, the Catholic Representative for Turnhout, had as early as 1884 said: ‘There is not a company, not a squadron where there are no Flemish soldiers, sometimes in vast numbers. Is it not their natural and constitutional right to be commanded in Flemish, I do not say by Flemish, but in intelligible Flemish?’⁵³ These views caused particular concern within the Walloon ranks. The prospect of obligatory, or at the very least, expected knowledge of Flemish among officers was an uncomfortable concept. Liberal representative, Jules Bara, articulated the view that these policies would significantly limit the opportunities of young Walloon men seeking to make a career in the army.⁵⁴

Wallingantisme was much slower to mobilise than its Flemish counterpart; however, it grew in the immediate prewar years to become a noisy pressure group capable of influencing political thought. The Walloon Assembly, established in 1884, sought to keep Flemish out of the army and the University of Ghent but did not seek to push matters much further.⁵⁵ While appearing moderate compared to future incarnations of the movement, a cursory glance at the even more diverse multiethnic Habsburg Army would suggest that there was no real need to defend French linguistic domination with such alacrity. The Austro-Hungarian army accorded official status to 10 languages, yet operated a system that expected officers to learn the ‘regimental language’ of their men, which most were able to achieve owing to the considerable amount of time devoted to languages in the Empire’s military

⁵² P.P.R., 22 May 1913.

⁵³ Ibid., 8 February 1884.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 14 December 1887 and 25 April 1888.

⁵⁵ L. Wils, ‘Le gouvernement catholique de Broqueville, le Roi Albert Ier et les conséquences des élections du 2 juin’, in P. Destatte, C. Lanneau, and F. Meurant-Pailhe (eds.), *Jules Destrée. Le Lettre au roi, et au-delà 1912–2012. Actes du colloque des 24 et 25 avril 2012* (Musée de la Vie Wallonne & Institut Destrée, Liège & Namur, 2013), p. 42.

schools. A degree of uniformity was maintained using about 80 German words of command to be learned and used across all units. Although convoluted, it eased the linguistic tensions and only began to split at the seams under the weight of casualties during the First World War.⁵⁶

Born out of the defeat of the Liberal-Socialist movement in 1912, however, the Walloon movement took on an even more aggressive stance in response to the increased militancy of its Flemish counterpart. Calls for provincial autonomy were added to the linguistic demands of yesteryear as, once again, the Catholics swept into office with the support of Flanders' power under the reformed electoral system. On 7 July 1912, the Walloon Congress nominally backed the idea of an administrative split and set up a commission to examine the issue. This resulted in the famous letter by Jules Destrée to King Albert I, published on 15 August, which detailed the misgivings of Walloon intellectuals. In it the juxtaposition of clerical Flanders with anticlerical Wallonia was made evident in ethnic as well as civic terms. The danger posed to French culture in Flanders, encapsulated in the debate to make the University of Ghent a Flemish institution, was again raised as a rallying call for retreating Walloons.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, there were suggestions that the officer corps was not as ignorant of Flemish, nor categorically opposed to its increased use. The former of these points was raised in 1913 when the assertion that three-quarters of senior officers did not know a word of Flemish was contested. Of 63 senior officers—generals not included—a mere 18 claimed knowledge of the language. Interestingly, however, the proportion was largely inversed among subalterns, where 334 out of 496 stated the same. This can be explained in two ways. First, the lower down the chain of command an officer was, the more likely he would be required to communicate with his NCOs and men, the majority of whom knew only Flemish dialects. Second, and perhaps more significantly, however, was the hypothesis that suggested a convenient loss of memory occurred when officers reached their majority. Purposefully 'forgetting' Flemish was not uncommon, it was postulated, as senior officers who claimed to be able to speak it often found themselves burdened

⁵⁶ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, pp. 5 and 99–102.

⁵⁷ Wils, 'Le gouvernement catholique', pp. 41–42. For more on the opposing Walloon movement, see M. Van Ginderachter and J. Leerssen, 'Denied ethnicity: on the Walloon movement in Belgium', *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2012), pp. 230–246.

with extra work, presiding over Flemish military councils, and administrative duties.⁵⁸

Although it is difficult to quantify the number of officers who used this excuse to their advantage, it appears plausible when comparing the stark contrast in figures between junior and senior officers who admitted to knowing the language. This is not to say that all officers, Walloon and Flemish alike, shied away from the increasing pressure placed on them to become more accessible to their men. In their paternalistic role as the 'fathers' of the nation, it was deemed by some that it was only right to be bilingual in order to fairly dole out military justice and be a good influence on all recruits regardless of the linguistic issue.⁵⁹ Officers of both regions and languages openly supported this view, though linguistic parity in the army was delayed by the de Broqueville Government in the 1913 military reforms.⁶⁰

As much as the social issue of language plagued the army, it was only exacerbated by party politics, which often manifested itself within the officer corps as well. Many officers and politicians sympathetic to Flemish sensibilities were associated with the conservative Catholic Party with roots that were firmly imbedded in rural Flanders.⁶¹ Recognised as military sceptics, the Catholics were often depicted as the army's biggest enemy, which not surprisingly bred a certain degree of animosity among Liberal officers. Often this was expressed through the creation of exclusive political societies to which officers became attached, fostering a sense of 'them and us' within the ever-dissolving peacetime army. Membership of societies, such as the *Association Libérale de Bruxelles*, were questioned by Catholics on the grounds of legality, which ought to have been beholden to an 1810 law prohibiting such affiliations. These remarks were made in the wake of accusations that Liberal Governments were treating Catholic officers unfairly by allowing Liberals to join such guilds but preventing the creation of, and admission to, their conservative counterparts.⁶² A definitive ruling as to the legality of these societies was less than forthcoming and allowed them, and others, such as association with the Freemasons, to continue unabated. The result was that officers

⁵⁸ P.P.R., 23 April 1913.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 22 May 1913.

⁶⁰ Wils, 'Le gouvernement catholique', pp. 42–43.

⁶¹ For an in-depth study of the Catholic Party's influence in Belgian politics and European diplomacy, see Viaene, *Belgium*.

⁶² P.P.R., 14 January 1885.

were often in direct confrontation with one another over their politics at the expense of military discipline, efficiency, and image. This was contrary to General Prisse's circular stating: 'I desire that you do not neglect the need to protect from, and to reprimand all officers' affiliations to, societies which, directly or indirectly, impose on them obligations that are incompatible with their military duties'.⁶³ In the absence of sanctions, visible political fissures were occasionally brought to the public's attention, as seen in one newspaper's account of Liberal second-lieutenants being barred from cafés with strictly Catholic clientele.⁶⁴

In the Chamber of Representatives, the civil-military battle intensified even further when religion was brought into the fold. The obligation imposed on officers to participate in *Te Deum* deeply offended Liberals. Despite the army's link to the ceremony dating back to 1850 and the implicit demonstration of loyalty to the King, under whose orders they were traditionally obliged to participate, Liberal officers felt that in an age and country where expression of faith was rapidly declining, an obligatory presence undermined Belgian liberties. The belief that, on joining the army, officers gave up a portion of their freedom and owed an added sense of loyalty to the monarch, as both Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the army, did not go very far towards convincing the Liberals that religion had a place in the military establishment. Indeed, they feared that a continuation of this practice could soon filter down into society and pave the way for increased Clerical influence.⁶⁵ In this way the army was caught in a crossfire of social, political, and military interests on a public stage, unable to keep its own house in order.

Peacetime soldiering, although the norm in a neutral army, produced a stage for social problems to be expressed as well as engendering purely military issues that struck at the foundations of professionalism and excellence. Boredom, apathy, and ever-slowing promotion rates, in particular, rapidly disillusioned a number of men within the officer corps. The standard procedure for peacetime promotion saw commissions to second-lieutenant awarded solely to men with two years of experience as an NCO or who had completed a course at the *École Militaire*. This created a comparatively varied spread of social backgrounds in the officer corps compared to most other European armies. Promotion to lieutenant and

⁶³ Ibid., 2 February 1885.

⁶⁴ *Journal d'Ypres*, 11 March 1891.

⁶⁵ P.P.R., 15 March 1905 and 21 March 1905.

subsequently to captain required two years of service in each rank, after which it became four years to attain a majority. A minimum of three years as a major would allow for promotion to lieutenant-colonel, and two more years would pave the way to a colonelcy. During times of war, these time-frames were to be halved.

Promotion, aside from the limitations imposed on each rank, was carried out on a part-seniority and part-merit system, with two-thirds of infantry and cavalry commissions to second-lieutenant awarded nominally by the King and a third to NCOs. By contrast, two-thirds of commissions to the technical arms were reserved for *École Militaire* graduates. Nominations to the ranks of lieutenant and captain were half by seniority in the entirety of the arm in question, and half at the behest of the King; in addition, the monarch claimed complete control of the promotions to senior ranks. The attempt at this delicate balancing act bred discontent as talented officers did not always get their just rewards as the weight of seniority in an ever-growing officer corps created a bottleneck that slowed promotion rates and dampened prospects to the point of disillusionment and precarious morale.

Senior commands, nominally selected on merit by appointed military committees, proved to be a problem with regard to a perceived penchant for patronage and favouritism, which often saw one branch of the service dominate others. This was a result of 'stacked' panels of senior officers selecting men for Divisional or Territorial Commands from their branch of the service rather than those who merited the position or were next on the seniority list. This was often seen to favour the artillery, which had notoriously slow promotion rates anyway. With senior positions appearing infrequently and not being evenly distributed among the various arms, certain ones (e.g., the infantry) became undesirable as the prospects of rapid promotion lower down the chain were quashed by the immobility of its senior ranks.

In a speech concerning an amendment to the 1886 Promotion Bill, Count Adrien d'Oultremont voiced the concerns of all officers when he stated: 'The experience of the last fifty years has proved that the principal factor influencing the progression of careers [...] is nothing more than pure chance'.⁶⁶ What he meant by this was that several anomalies and vices had crept into the half-and-half system, which satisfied neither promotion

⁶⁶AER 1510/40-299, de Broqueville Papers, General Considerations Regarding the Proposed Modifications to the Law of 16 June 1836 Governing the Promotion of Officers.

by merit nor seniority. Favouritism was at the root of the issue and had bred a certain degree of apathy within the corps as officers often felt that verve, talent, and application were insignificant in guaranteeing promotion by merit. This loss of dedication to the professional standards inculcated during the formative years was concerning and prompted a series of proposed modifications. Among them were suggestions to abolish promotion by merit in its current form and introduce a system of supplements to seniority that would establish good service. These might include recommendations, General Staff brevets, or other relevant experience. Nevertheless, opponents argued that achievements did not necessarily translate into talent or merit.⁶⁷ Additionally, this system would not benefit the average officer who, by chance or design, would not find himself in a position to obtain recognition as other more ambitious or fortunate colleagues. While it was clearly a justifiable concern, it did nothing to inspire confidence in the assiduous who felt their careers were stagnating before them.

Variations between branches made for lean and prosperous periods at given junctures; however, this served only to heighten discontent and rivalry among the embittered. This was exemplified in 1868 when a cavalry officer, Colonel Wolff, attempted to improve his promotion prospects by transferring into the Gendarmerie. In a note to the King, the Minister of War, Auguste Goethals, explained that because of cavalry officers being highly valued, this had proven successful in the past. Yet, its pitfall was the small size of the Gendarmerie. It lent itself to blockages if a more senior cavalry officer transferred, which was what occurred in Wolff's case. It was noted that had he continued in the cavalry, which had the benefit of not allowing Gendarmerie officers to transfer into it, Wolff would have, ironically, benefited from swifter promotion.⁶⁸

This seeming disillusionment with the rate of promotion in the cavalry is interesting, however, due to the fact that it boasted the quickest promotion rates of any branch of the army. On average, cavalry officers in 1875 would obtain their majority after 25 and a quarter years of service, compared to 27 years in the infantry. Similarly, whereas the rate of promotion had remained relatively stable for junior officers in the cavalry since 1845, the

⁶⁷ Ibid., de Broqueville Papers, Proposition on the Law of Officer Promotions by M. Driant, 1912.

⁶⁸ RA, Archives du Cabinet du Roi—Règne de Léopold II, 2132, Note concerning Colonel Wolff of the Gendarmerie by Goethals, 29 September 1868.

infantry's promotion rates had slowed by three years over the same period. This was because of the expansion in the numbers of junior officers entering the infantry, which was not exponential to the number of senior posts created. This was not the case for the cavalry, which benefitted from a more controlled reorganisation over time.

Conversely, the expansion of the technical arms, coupled with the higher prospects of the increasing proportion of *École Militaire* graduates, saw the rate of promotion in these arms accelerate significantly over the same three decades. This was particularly the case for lieutenants and captains in the engineers, whose promotions were twice as rapid as those in the cavalry and infantry, respectively. This meant that in comparison to the technical arms of the British Army (the only ones not controlled by purchase before 1871), Belgian artillery and engineer regiments could expect their senior lieutenants to have served almost five years fewer, but their senior major two and half years more.⁶⁹

By the turn of the century, promotion rates across all arms had slowed even further as the lack of wastage among a peacetime force became increasingly apparent. Officers could expect to have to wait a further 18 months to reach their first captaincy, compared to the 1870s which, at that point, was just one of up to five rungs on the promotion ladder before attaining a majority (Table 3.3). The lack of decent career prospects prompted many good officers to get out of the army, spurring the outspoken Major Auguste Collon of the artillery to note in 1912:

All that it [the infantry] had in terms of men of valour have disappeared, disgusted by the 'arrivistes' who have profited from the last regime to decapitate this arm to the point that we were forced to promote to General an entire group of incapables, who ordinarily ought not to have exceeded the rank of Captain.⁷⁰

Table 3.3 Years of Service for Lieutenants to Obtain a Majority, 1845–1875

	<i>Infantry</i>	<i>Cavalry</i>	<i>Artillery</i>	<i>Engineers</i>	<i>Average</i>
1845	24.2	25.3	30.9	29.7	29.8
1875	27.1	25.2	26.9	27.2	27.1

⁶⁹ Spiers, *Late Victorian Army*, p. 91.

⁷⁰ AER 1510/38-295, de Broqueville Papers, Collon to Neuray, 17 March 1912.

This had been an ongoing trend, which not only reduced the standard of officers within the army but also projected a poor image to the rest of society. Indeed, *La Belgique Militaire*, an official internal military publication, wrote as early as 1871 that the officer corps was becoming an appealing career for the uninterested sons of great families, sons of a military background, and those with no specific career in mind.⁷¹ Why would the qualified son of a bourgeois family choose a potentially stunted career in the army when he could make his fortune in business with half as much effort? In its inability to satisfactorily promote the prospects of a military career, the officer corps risked losing the elements it most desired to retain its professional standards.

Part of the problem stemmed from an insufficient, or poorly applied, means to rid the corps of unwanted elements. This had two effects: first, retaining a group of incapable officers within the service, and second, creating unwanted congestion that stifled and alienated the more talented elements. A Royal Decree in 1855 had fixed the maximum age limits of officers by rank, beyond which they would be pensioned off. Junior officers could serve until the age of 55, majors and lieutenant-colonels until 58, colonels until 60, major-generals until 63, and lieutenant-generals until 65—though a degree of latitude was applied in a number of cases.⁷² It was hoped that the correct application would see officers pensioned off not only for ‘physical incapacities but moral ones as well’.⁷³ Nevertheless, in an increasingly unusual demonstration of solidarity, it was found that this option had been very sparingly used as a result of a unanimous opinion that officers’ pensions were too low to justify this act. Not until the pension situation in the army had been resolved on the eve of the First World War, and brought up to parity with other sections of the Civil Service, did this action increase in frequency.

The delay in proceedings, however, was too late to significantly alter the general attitude of disgruntlement that had firmly taken root over the preceding decades. This can clearly be seen through a rather alarming encounter that De Selliers had with an officer in 1911, in which the latter asked not to be nominated for promotion. The Premier, Charles de

⁷¹ *La Belgique Militaire*, 30 April 1871.

⁷² RA, Archives du Cabinet du Roi, Règne de Léopold I, 159/102, Royal Decree No. 9422, 18 April 1855.

⁷³ AER 1510/40-299, de Broqueville Papers—report entitled: ‘Revision of the Status of the Officer Corps’, 1912.

Broqueville, was quickly informed of what was perceived to be a crisis of morale. After receiving confirmation from other sources of similar attitudes across several garrisons, particularly Ghent and Antwerp, de Broqueville made clear his anxiety concerning the state of the whole officer corps.⁷⁴ Many of the early principles on which the army had been founded, especially its professionalism, had all but disappeared through the inertia of peacetime soldiering. Many ambitious young men were seemingly being forced to consider their futures as career officers. Whereas some were prepared to endure the trials and tribulations of the situation, others were left with no choice but to leave the service altogether or explore other avenues in order to avoid stagnation.

One of the most appealing options was service in the Congo Free State on special detachment from the line. Laurent A. Six identified some 589 officers who took to service in the Congo between 1877 and 1908 for a multitude of reasons. These included boredom with barrack life, the appeal of adventure and conquering the unknown, and a certain notion of humanitarianism. Above all was the quest for more rapid advancement.⁷⁵ This was especially the case among the young and those who had come through the ranks who felt their chances of promotion were somewhat limited under the current circumstances. For the ambitious lower-middle class officer, the Congo also offered an unprecedented opportunity for social mobility. The army played a pivotal role in Empire and strengthened its position within metropolitan society by creating new heroes at a time when the last remaining folkloric 'blueblouse' volunteers of 1830 were dying off.⁷⁶

If this were not incentive enough, then higher rates of pay and bonuses, paid for by the Belgian Government it must be added, and a temporary step in rank, were enough to convince many to take a chance in the severe climate. Despite reverting to their metropolitan rank on their return, the frequency with which it was restored by Royal patronage made the gamble one worth taking.⁷⁷ Indeed, with the right connections and a great deal of

⁷⁴ AER 1510/38-294, de Broqueville Papers, De Selliers to de Broqueville, 26 November 1911.

⁷⁵ L.A. Six, 'Les Officiers Belges au Congo (1877-1908)' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1989), pp. 25-29.

⁷⁶ V. Viaene, 'King Leopold's Imperialism and the Origins of the Belgian Colonial Party, 1860-1905', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 80, no. 4 (2008), p. 758.

⁷⁷ Six, 'Officiers Belges au Congo', pp. 29-30.

vigour, it was possible for officers to at least regain their old positions if not better them by making a case for the added experience they gained in Africa.⁷⁸ According to some, the authorities were eager to accede to the requests of returning officers, simply to keep them in the army. There had been an alarming increase in the number of officers resigning their commissions to take up posts in the financially lucrative commercial companies with which they had dealt while in Africa.⁷⁹ The Liberal representative for Brussels, Émile Féron, was particularly concerned in 1893 with the apparent preferentialism accorded to Congo returnees, stating:

[T]here will inevitably be inequality between those officers who take service in the Congo and those who remain in Belgium. It follows that the former will have opportunities to distinguish themselves that will not be afforded to the others. The latter will evidently suffer from this state of affairs, and, consequently, will make the military careers of these young men who do not wish to serve abroad, insufferable. [...] I, I shall repeat again, assert that, for those officers who do not serve in the Congo, promotion will become more and more difficult, and that is already a serious fact.⁸⁰

Ironically, the attempt to retain the services of one group of disgruntled officers, albeit with newly acquired experience, only served to irk another group who stayed home. Yet, if attempts to keep the former had not been taken, it is plausible that a great deal more officers would have resigned their commissions and returned to the Congo to make their fortunes.

The issue at hand was largely concerned with the Government's continued obligation to pay the salaries of officers serving in the Congo, despite them nominally being under the authority of the Free State. Belgium did not annex its colony until 1908. More galling still was that none of the 1,612 NCOs who served alongside their officers in the *Force Publique* obtained the same support. Abuses of the system were once again the crux of the argument, with officers often being paid supplements for horses and other effects that they either did not need or did not have. Despite this, the interim Minister of War in 1897, Jules Vandenpeereboom, was adamant

⁷⁸ MRA, Belgian Military Abroad, Congo 43/55 XV 263/33. H. Doquier to C. & M. Desmet, 2 November 1896.

⁷⁹ P.P.R., 3 March 1905.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 13 July 1893.

that the Government would not alter the state of affairs given that it could only be beneficial to the army to have men of experience return to its cadres.⁸¹ Eight years later, the then Minister of War, Alexandre Cousebant d'Alkemade, had to defend himself against repeated onslaughts regarding the payment of officers who were supposed to be attached to the *Institut Cartographique Militaire* at La Cambre in the service of the home army, but were in fact in Africa supporting and promoting the commercial interests of the Free State's entrepreneurs. In his mind, whether the officers were physically in the Congo or not made little difference as they were still nominally on active service with full rights to pay and supplements accorded to other officers on mission or detachment to foreign armies. This appears to contradict reports in the press that quoted the Minister of War in 1894 saying that the home army's cadres would not suffer from the continuous exodus of officers as they were all on the list of reserves.⁸² Whatever their true status, it is evident that their presence in the Congo was both a qualitative and quantitative drain on the officer corps.

Following the shambolic Belgian mobilisation during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, the authorities became increasingly preoccupied with the reorganisation of the army to counteract any future threat. Part of the unsolved questions concerned the officer corps, and particularly that of the Officer Reserve to fill the cadres of expanded units when placed on a war footing. Numbers had been a persistent thorn in the side of this corps, which, according to one correspondent, was some 800 infantry officers short by 1897.⁸³ Although it allowed some officers the opportunity to continue offering their services to the army and the nation, surprisingly few opted to take this route. This lack of enthusiasm in part can be attributed to the questionable legality of the status of reserve officers and the subsequent dual role they were asked to perform.

The Royal Decree of 22 December 1887 creating and nominating reserve officers was found to be at odds with, as well as legally inferior to, the Law of 16 June 1856, which established four categories of officer that did not include a reserve. Despite being appointed for eight years by Royal Decree under the guise of officers on unpaid leave—a position that actually

⁸¹ Ibid., 18 May 1897.

⁸² *Gazette de Charleroi*, 22 December 1894.

⁸³ Ibid., 16 March 1897.

could be maintained only for one year—they were also all subject to service in the Civic Guard due to their official classification as civilians.⁸⁴ Such an uncertain situation was uncomfortable enough without the added insult of being excluded from annual training camps and manoeuvres prior to 1903. Naturally, this proved unpopular with those on the reserve lists and drew some piercing remarks in 1897 from French observers who questioned: ‘Is it not a crime to stop these devoted men to prepare themselves during peacetime for duties which we will expect of them during war?’⁸⁵ It is not surprising, therefore, that numbers remained low until the outbreak of war, when the true effects of a discordant policy materialised.

Attempts to resolve the numerical deficiencies led to the decision to admit one-year volunteers and men from the newly established University Companies to fill the reserve cadres. Both were to first learn the responsibilities of corporals and serve in this rank for six months (eight for the cavalry and artillery) before sitting for an examination to obtain the brevet rank of sergeant. Following two years as sergeants, during which time the University Companies were subject to two annual recalls of 15 days for training, manoeuvres, and shooting drills, they were permitted to take the examination to become reserve brevet second-lieutenants; the full rank was accorded following further appearances at annual recalls.⁸⁶ Whereas in France, the creation of one-year volunteers was introduced after the abolition of replacement in 1872 to allow the wealthy to escape conscription, Belgium’s system ran concurrently with the ballot until 1909.⁸⁷ This offered yet another route of escape from military service for those destined for the liberal professions, albeit harnessing their capacities in the reserve rather than losing out entirely.

To seemingly fill the numerical void with the right class of man, who contributed towards the training costs, was a favourable outcome for the Catholics in their battle to avoid general service. Nevertheless, there were several problems, both qualitative and legal, that proved difficult to overcome. This was especially the case for the University Companies that found themselves at the centre of a press storm questioning their utility.

⁸⁴ *Gazette de Charleroi*, 4 August 1896; P.P.R., 17 June 1903.

⁸⁵ *Gazette de Charleroi*, 20 September 1897.

⁸⁶ AER 1510/40-299, de Broqueville Papers, Report: ‘Modifications to be made concerning the recruitment of Reserve Officers’. A system that could substitute for the current system. University Companies—Incorporation of the annual contingent, 1911.

⁸⁷ Porch, *March to the Marne*, p. 25.

The editor of the *Gazette de Liège* examined the need to perhaps adopt the French system of maintaining a gap between the classroom and the barracks so as to avoid the current situation, which was providing neither a profound education nor suitably trained soldiers.⁸⁸ Catholic policy had always been to protect the interests of students (particularly those in theology) from the corruptive distractions of the barracks, but pressure from the military authorities to ensure that the army was not being deprived of its best elements through this system eventually forced change. A law, set for passage in 1913, obliged students to put their military duties first by allowing them a mere 15 days of leave prior to their exams to attend to their scholarly needs.⁸⁹ This ensured that training was not curtailed and that these men shared at least some of the burden enforced on the average balloted man before retreating into the shadow of the officer reserve. It equally reinforced a shared European-wide desire to concentrate on the physical growth of the individual to counter a perceived social degeneration in the late nineteenth century.⁹⁰

The Belgian officer corps clearly underwent substantial changes over the course of the nineteenth century as it sought to establish and maintain the principles on which good leadership was based. From the outset, professionalism was highly valued as the nascent army grappled with the realities, and future prospect, of war. This process began the homogenisation of the corps, whose composition became increasingly Belgian and increasingly educated at the military institutions of the *École Militaire* and *École de Guerre*. A military *esprit de corps*, promoted through misplaced faith in the noble virtues of the duel, succeeded in solidifying bonds within the emerging officer caste but at the expense of marginalising the sympathies and understanding of society. Certainly, the retention of high numbers of officers promoted from the ranks slowed the complete overhaul of the officer corps into a detached enclave from society by upholding the last vestiges of a revolutionary spirit through retaining the influence of the *petit-bourgeoisie*; however, even this could not prevent the decline of standards that accompanied decades of peacetime soldiering.

⁸⁸ *Gazette de Liège*, 19 July 1911.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 17 November 1911.

⁹⁰ AER 1510/40-299, de Broqueville Papers, Report: 'Modifications to Reserve Officers', 1911.

Linguistic, religious, and political issues, which mirrored societal trends, exemplified the complications that came to undermine the preparedness of the army to satisfactorily manage the trials that would accompany the twentieth century. Alienation of primary Flemish-speakers reached its nadir in the decades preceding the outbreak of war as Flanders' population moved towards bilingualism to compete with the disproportionate number of native French speakers in middle-ranking professions and the officer corps. Overt discrimination, such as the decision not to appoint Lieutenant-General Clooten to the rank of Minister of War as a result of his 'deplorable Flemish accent', did nothing to instil confidence in an increasingly dissatisfied body of men.⁹¹

Slowing promotion rates on account of peacetime soldiering and a lack of wastage further eroded the morale of all concerned, which inevitably detracted from the qualitative standards of the early days. Significant numbers chanced their arm in the Congo where the financial reward in heading up burgeoning commercial enterprises far exceeded the prospects of decades' worth of garrison duty in provincial Belgian towns. This not only siphoned off the most ambitious and energetic elements of the officer corps but also dissuaded future generations of middle-class prospects from a military career. By the outbreak of war in 1914, therefore, the officer corps lacked the requisite professionalism and unity that it had sought when it was established in the 1830s as a result of a combination of social, political, and military problems that, despite being acknowledged, proved too formidable to adequately contain.

⁹¹ AER 1510/38-295, de Broqueville Papers, Collon to Neuray, 2 March 1912.

The Rank and File

Recruitment for the Belgian Army was a perennial problem during the nineteenth century, not so much in acquiring the quantity of men necessary to maintain its 80,000 to 100,000 wartime establishment, but because of the sociopolitical problems that surrounded the injustices of the ballot system through which it was obtained. Annual levies of between 10,000 and 13,300 men were voted by Parliament each year as a supplement to volunteers; though the latter being so few in number meant that the ballot, operating on a proportionate basis across the country, was the dominant source of manpower.¹ Born out of the Napoleonic system, faculty for replacement and substitution provided an escape from the burden of military service for an extortionate price. It was seen as the rich man's privilege and left the rest of society to suffer the 'blood tax' in their stead.² This social injustice sat uneasily in a liberal country and found itself at the heart of a fierce civil-military debate until the twentieth century, when a string of Ministers of

¹L. de Vos, *Het Effectief van de Belgische Krijgsmacht en de Militiewetgeving, 1830–1914* (Koninklijk Legermuseum, Brussels, 1985), p. 34.

²L. De Vos and E. Bastin, 'Du Tirage au Sort avec Faculté de Remplacement au Service Personnel: Le Recrutement des Conscripts en Belgique de 1830 à 1914, une Question Militaire et Politique', *International Review of Military History*, no. 86 (2006), p. 42. For more on the French equivalent, see I. Wolloch, 'Napoleonic Conscription: State Power and Civil Society', *Past and Present*, no. 111 (1986), pp. 101–102 and 113–115; D. Porch, *Army and Revolution: France, 1815–1848* (Routledge & Keegan Paul, London and Boston, 1974), pp. 61–78.

War introduced voluntary enlistment (1902), partial conscription (1909), and universal conscription (1913) successively in little over a decade. Pressure from the military authorities to introduce personal and obligatory service earlier, particularly following Prussian military successes in 1866 and 1870, fell on deaf ears in Government, which, whether Liberal or Catholic, was wary of disaffecting the small electorate who were among the major beneficiaries of the ballot and replacement system.³

Regardless of the debates surrounding its changeable organisation, efficiency, and role, the army remained a constant in the lives of the population. Families across the country were compelled to give up the youth of the nation at the peak of productivity in order to defend a concept of neutrality that was already safeguarded by the 1839 Treaty of London. Independence and internal law and order were only intermittently threatened prior to 1914, creating a situation whereby local interests were seemingly supplanted by a nonexistent national emergency. The burden of military service, therefore, often felt disproportionately heavily, helping antimilitarism to persist among certain sections of Belgian society.⁴ To assimilate these conflicting views, it was imperative that the army play a more socially constructive role. In essence, as an institution through which a large number of the population would pass, the army was to act as the ‘school of the nation’.⁵ Inspiration was initially drawn from Revolutionary France, where conscription had helped to promote national over regional identity.⁶ Belgium hoped to do the same; although the army was to be much more than an

³É. Wanty, *Le Milieu Militaire Belge de 1831 à 1914* (Palais des Académies, Brussels, 1957), p. 47.

⁴For more on antimilitarism in Belgium, see F. Lehouck, *Het antimilitarisme in België, 1830–1914* (Uitgeversmaatschappij N.V. Standaard-Boekhandel, Antwerp, 1958). For a contrasting view, particularly relating to the late nineteenth century, see N. de Mûelenaere, ‘An Uphill Battle: Campaigning for the Militarization of Belgium, 1870–1914’, *Journal of Belgian History*, vol. 42, no. 4 (2012), pp. 144–179; ‘Belgen zijn gij ten strijde gereed? Militariseren een neutrale natie, 1890–1914’ (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Antwerp, 2016).

⁵J. Hoegaerts, ‘Benevolent Fathers and Virile Brothers: Metaphors of Kinship and Age in the Nineteenth-Century Belgian Army’, *Low Countries Historical Review*, vol. 127, no. 1 (2012), p. 78.

⁶A. Forrest, ‘*La patrie en danger*: The French Revolution and the First *Levée en Masse*’ in D. Moran and A. Waldron (eds.), *The People in Arms: Military Myth and National Mobilisation since the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006), pp. 25–30.

ethnic ‘melting pot’.⁷ It was to become a vehicle for social improvement too, dealing as much in security as in prosperity. Prussia had demonstrated in 1870 that the army could forge a nation in this manner. In doing so, it set a precedent for Belgium and others to follow.⁸

The Belgian ballot system, through which the army was recruited, was simply a continuation of the French 1798 and Dutch 1815 and 1817 Laws already in use in the region. Initially, annual contingents of 12,000 men were called up to supplement voluntary enlistments. From 1840, the class was reduced to 10,000 men as the army returned to a peacetime footing of 36,110 men. No changes to the annual intake were made until 1869 when it reverted back to 12,000 men to accommodate the increase in the wartime establishment from 80,000 to 100,000. The result was to maintain the army at a peacetime strength of approximately 45,000 to 50,000 until universal conscription was introduced in 1913.⁹ The burden was shared proportionally by head of population across all nine provinces, where every registered twenty-year-old male, who had not already obtained a form of exemption, physical or otherwise, was called up alphabetically in a public event to draw his lot from the ballot box. The lowest numbers—until the province’s quota was completed—formed, along with the other provinces, the annual levy for that year. However, exemptions, replacements, and substitutions often significantly altered the composition of the initial draw. Those finally selected were then incorporated into the various regiments dotted throughout the country on an eight-year active engagement to be followed by up to five years in the reserve. Time under arms in an infantry regiment varied, between a high of 30 months in the 1850s and 1860s, to 28 months and a one-month recall throughout the rest of the century, before plummeting to just 20 months in 1902 and 15 months in 1909. In reality, however, many men were

⁷R. Boijen, ‘Het Leger als Smeltkroes van de Natie?’, *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis*, no. 3 (1997), pp. 55–70.

⁸D. Porch, *The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871–1914* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981), pp. 23–53. For the Prussian model, see W. Diest, ‘Remarks on the Preconditions to Waging War in Prussia-Germany, 1866–71’, in S. Förster and J. Nagler (eds.), *On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861–1871* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997), pp. 312–320; D. Showalter, *The Wars of German Unification* (Hodder Education, London, 2004), pp. 62–66.

⁹De Vos, *Het Effectief*, pp. 378–381.

furloughed after serving a fraction of the time.¹⁰ Men who were not called up were still liable for any subsequent levies found to be deficient in numbers until they had reached their 23rd birthday, while they were all compelled to serve in the Civic Guard until the age of 50.

Most recruits were obtained by ballot, with only small numbers choosing to voluntarily enlist. Indeed, the 1852 Recruitment Commission's published statistics for the previous year indicated that just 11.5% of recruits had contracted voluntary engagements over the previous eight years.¹¹ Additionally, only 5,496 balloted men reengaged over the same period, bringing the total proportion to roughly 19%. Despite seemingly poor from the outset, these figures were at the highest point that they were to attain for the remainder of the century. Thereafter a slow, constant decline ensued to the point where, by 1875, voluntary engagements accounted for no more than 5.4% of the establishment, which itself was nearing its reorganised size of 120,000 men.¹² It was a first indication of the army's poor standing within society.

The effect was to reduce the available pool from which to draw suitable, long-serving, noncommissioned officers (NCOs). Those with a desire for a military life were engaged for three, four, or five years of service, depending on their age. They were then swiftly enrolled into a regimental school for up to two years whose intention it was to produce future corporals, sergeants, and even second-lieutenants for the army. Yet, with fewer men seeking a military career, such measures could only go so far. When it is considered that a builder's daily salary was more than double that of an infantry sergeant's after deductions had been made for clothing, sustenance, and bedding, it is not surprising to find fewer and fewer men willing to endure the strain.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., Barring the period 1848–1855 where recruits served for seven years, the active engagement in the infantry was for eight years. The number of years passed in the reserve rose over time, from one year (1857–1861), to two years (1862–1885), to five years (1886–1913).

¹¹ Verbal Proceeds of the 1852 Recruitment Committee, p. 71 (hereafter Rec Comm 1852). These figures differ a fraction from those published in Belgium, Ministry of Interior, *Statistique Générale de la Belgique. Exposé de la Situation du Royaume (Période Décennale de 1851 à 1860)*, Tome II, p. 437, which states that 9,448 men had contracted a voluntary engagement over the same period.

¹² Figures computed from data in *Exposé 1860, Tome II*, p. 436; Belgium, Ministry of Interior, *Statistique Générale de la Belgique: Exposé de la Situation du Royaume de 1861 à 1875*, Tome I, pp. 378–379.

¹³ Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, pp. 144–145 and 193.

Henri-Alexis Brialmont, Belgium's preeminent officer and engineer during the nineteenth century, felt that the situation was compounded by the ordinary conditions of service.¹⁴ Poor pay, inadequate pensions, rudimentary lodgings, and obstacles to marriage, all contributed to lowering the image and respectability of NCOs. As such, nearly a third of the army's 2,788 NCOs in 1871 were comprised of inexperienced 18 to 21-year-olds, among which were a number of balloted *miliciens* and replacements.¹⁵

Following Prussian successes in the 1860s, the debate surrounding volunteers in Belgium shifted towards whether to introduce them on a one-year basis to form the NCO and officer cadres of the much sought-after reserve. The 1867 Recruitment Commission hoped to raise the annual contingent to 14,500 of which 2,000 men would be specifically destined for the national reserve, receiving only seven months of training in the process.¹⁶ In Prussia, the system of one-year volunteers was seen as a way of reconciling the educated and property-owning bourgeoisie with universal conscription. Although only a fraction of those qualified to serve met their military obligation, the increasing participation by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War demonstrated an acceptance of the army among the middle classes.¹⁷

In Belgium, militarism took much longer to cultivate. The volunteering spirit among the bourgeoisie did not materialise until the early twentieth century and deprived the army of precisely the class of intelligent recruit it most desired for its NCO cadres. It was difficult to convince young men destined for the liberal professions to clothe, equip, and train themselves at their own expense when they might simply avoid military service altogether. Moreover, it was suggested that further concessions to wealth would be 'repugnant' to most of the population.¹⁸ However, the 1871 Recruitment Commission voted in favour of the principle—17 votes to one, with two abstentions.¹⁹ But whereas the indiscriminate nature of

¹⁴Un Officier Supérieur, *Réorganisation du Système Militaire de la Belgique* (Brussels, 1866), p. 27.

¹⁵Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, p. 144.

¹⁶Commission set up to examine whether the current organisation of the army responds to the necessities of national defence in 1866 (hereafter Comm 1866).

¹⁷Diest, 'Remarks on the Preconditions to Waging War', pp. 316–317.

¹⁸P.P.R., 13 May 1873.

¹⁹Verbal Proceeds of the Commission Instituted by Royal Decree of 18 April 1871 to study the questions relative to the organisation of the army, published in 1873, 8th Meeting, 14 June 1871 (hereafter Comm 1871); AER POS.2871-521, Malou Papers Report compiled by

universal conscription could accommodate one-year volunteers, the ballot system with faculty for replacement and substitution could not. In France, only 3% of the 1886 contingent were one-year volunteers, which ‘hardly constituted an abuse substantial enough to undermine the principle of national service’.²⁰ Belgium’s two forms of monetary escape, however, already precluded wealthy families from the burden of military service, which reduced the incentive to volunteer and aggravated the social injustices of the recruiting system in the process.

The idyllic notion of a true nation-in-arms, comprising all classes of society in defence of Belgian liberties and neutrality, was utopic to say the least. Replacements could be bought for extortionate sums of money to absolve, primarily, wealthy individuals of military service. Only if a replacement proved to be physically inadequate or deserted was the purchaser compelled to serve out the rest of the engagement himself.²¹ After 18 months had elapsed, an insurance premium of 150 florins (£317) could be paid to liberate him of any further responsibility. Most replacements were found among the civilian population, though, from 1848 onwards, soldiers from their eighth year of service were also accepted. A substitution, on the other hand, involved one of two processes. First, a prospective recruit could swap a low number with a high chance of being called up in the provincial quota with someone who drew a higher number with a lower chance. Alternatively, they could simply swap positions for a sum of money, generally much lower than that for a replacement, with a soldier in their sixth, seventh, or eighth year of service. This second option would see the new *milicien* take the position of the old soldier on indefinite leave for the remainder of the engagement, while the substitute would take up a new engagement of eight years, usually with a view to pursuing a career as an NCO. This was providing that the substitute was no older than 42 and had been reengaged no more than once before.²²

the Sub-Committee charged with presenting a Bill for the organisation of the army, 1871. It was decided that for the sake of equality, volunteers—one year included—would still participate in the annual ballot once they reached the required age and would only be deducted from the communal quota if they picked a ‘bad’ number; otherwise, simply being incorporated as a supplement to the establishment.

²⁰ Porch, *March to the Marne*, p. 25.

²¹ *Exposé 1860, Tome II*, p. 432.

²² *Ibid.*

Militarily, replacement and substitution constituted a veritable scourge that created a false impression of the army's true effective strength. A duplication of manpower occurred when replacements obtained from the eighth class were counted in both their original and new intakes. When the army mobilised during the Franco-Prussian War, it was found to be 31,385 men, or 31%, below establishment.²³ The authorities could only account for 22.5% of these absences, with 5% stemming from a natural shortfall in the annual contingents, 6.6% receiving definitive leave having married in their eighth, ninth, or tenth year of service, and 10.9% as a result of natural wastage from deaths and desertions. The remaining 6.5% were unaccounted for and were primarily found to be men who had fallen off, or did not exist on, the register of furloughed soldiers.²⁴ A desperate plea for volunteers produced just 224 recruits, while amnesties for criminals and deserters scraped together another 110 and 702, respectively.²⁵ The Army of Observation was never called on to fight, but its mobilisation revealed a recruitment system unfit for purpose. Replacement and substitution had contributed to the poor response rate among reservists, revealing the apathy felt towards the nation's military institutions.

From a social point of view, the system of substitution and replacement was seen by many as a despicable breach of Belgian liberal ideals. Certainly, as some in favour of retaining the status quo argued, all men were equal before the ballot box, each with the same chance, whether rich or poor, to draw a 'bad' number. Yet, the options available to both afterwards differed significantly. From 1834, *l'Association Générale pour l'Encouragement du Service Militaire* operated a recognised system of replacement, supplying soldiers wishing to reengage upon termination of their first term of service. Wealthy families tended to insulate themselves from the military milieu in this way, but the fluctuating market value (£1,700 in 1835, rising to £3,000 in 1842) often outstripped the means of the labouring and lower-middle classes. *L'Association* continued providing an official service until 1847, furnishing approximately 15% of all replacements to the army. The

²³ For more on the Belgian Army's mobilisation and role during the Franco-Prussian War, see G. Hautecler, 'Léopold II, commandant en chef de l'armée belge mobilisée en 1870', *Revue internationale d'histoire Militaire*, vol. 24 (1965), pp. 439–453; C. Bêchet, 'Les Perceurs de Sedan: Violation de frontière et réactions belges pendant la guerre de 1870–1871', *Journal of Belgian History*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2016), pp. 72–99.

²⁴ Comm 1871, 7th Meeting, 7 June 1871.

²⁵ Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, p. 118; G. Hautecler, 'L'Armée belge de 1870 face à la crise de Sedan', *Revue internationale d'histoire Militaire*, vol. 20 (1959), p. 608.

rest were obtained by unofficial traffickers who targeted and exploited the poor.²⁶

Replacement was undoubtedly an exclusive business, but specialist insurance companies did offer ordinary working people a financially viable alternative. For an annual subscription of just F50 over a six-year period, the *Compagnie des Rentiers Réunis* would pay out between F1,500 and 1,800 for a replacement were an individual unlucky enough to draw a 'bad' number at the ballot. This broadened the purchasing market and corresponded with a discernible increase in the proportion of replacements being bought by the middle of the century. By 1865, replacements accounted for 35% of all incorporations.²⁷ Abuses and corruption proved all too commonplace, with extortionate prices compounded by the poor quality of the replacements provided. Traffickers often targeted society's poorest, who, rather than face ruin and destitution, would take their cut of proceedings as replacements before absconding. Not only did this leave buyers out of pocket and force them to serve out the rest of the engagement themselves but, as a social commentary, it highlighted the injustices of a system that exploited the needy and forced families to give up their breadwinners to the army for minimal short-term gains.

In an effort to regulate the process, the Government introduced a law in 1870 that prevented married men from becoming replacements and required the remainder to obtain certificates of good conduct from their commune. The State also agreed to take responsibility for replacements who deserted, removing the risk factor often associated with underhanded traffickers. For the first time, preemptive sums could be paid to the official *Administration*, who would provide a *volontaire avec prime* (V.A.P.) from among serving soldiers under the age of 40 or civilians of good character between the ages of 25 and 30. For a maximum of two, eight-year terms, these men would receive a bounty of F300 and a further F1,000 upon completing their engagement. Nevertheless, it proved so difficult to induce men to take up this offer that, in 1872, 1,046 of the 1,261 payees were reimbursed and forced to take their chances on the open market.²⁸

Despite its best intentions, this new regulated system did nothing to curb the abuses and social injustices that riled the public and politicians

²⁶ Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, p. 98.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 124–126.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

alike. First, it did not eradicate the private-sector agencies, which, as one representative noted, 'seeing the sword of Damocles suspended over the heads of these men called up late, profit through formulating excessive claims'.²⁹ Second, it created an uncomfortable situation whereby the lottery could once again be exceedingly cruel to the labouring and poorer artisanal classes. As pointed out in the Chamber of Representatives, hypothetically, a rich man could still escape service by paying a maximum of £1,800 if he was fortunate enough to be provided with a V.A.P. Were he not, it would mean paying what remained an affordable sum to an independent agent. Such an option remained closed for the average working family.³⁰ This is just one example of how the State fell short in its attempts to maintain an equitable and amenable relationship with the public over the question of military service.

Substitution, although initially only permitted between men of the same province, was an inexpensive way of avoiding military service. Swapping numbers at the draw with another man from the same contingent could absolve someone from military service completely. Alternatively, a significant reduction of the burden could be obtained by substituting a soldier in their sixth, seventh, or eighth year of service. Doing this subjected a man to a maximum of two one-month recalls per year, which consequently reduced the cost of the transaction compared to replacement premiums. Antwerp and the two Flanders boasted the lowest prices for substitutes in 1865, averaging £446 (Antwerp), £453 (East Flanders), and £529 (West Flanders), respectively.³¹ It is no surprise, therefore, to find that these three provinces headed the list for the highest rates of substitution. Contrarily, they boasted the lowest figures for replacement. This was a result of financial difficulties often experienced in the two Flanders by rural families, who had yet to recover economically from the 1846 famine.

With replacement and substitution increasing during the mid-nineteenth century, it is little wonder that the 1867 Commission predicted that the situation would only escalate in years to come. In their opinion, the growth in public wealth, coupled with the introduction and expansion of insurance companies, made replacement even more accessible to the lower-middle and labouring classes. This facilitation might create a

²⁹ P.P.R., 21 December 1881.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 20 November 1873.

³¹ Comm 1866, Report by the Sub-Committee, 20 March 1867.

situation where, by 1875, half the army would be composed of these ‘mercenaries’, the majority of whom originated from an ‘impure’ source of the population.³² The Army’s Divisional Commanders left the Commission in no doubt as to how they felt. Lieutenant-General Désart of the 2nd Infantry Division commented: ‘These men who, with but a few exceptions, hail from the lowest classes, constituting the leprosy of the army [...] are a veritable danger through the bad example that they set’. Equally, General Jambers of the 3rd Infantry Division feared that ‘replacement and substitution is depriving the army of elite soldiers who are replaced by vagabonds, taken from the depths of society. [...] It could compromise the very existence of the country’.³³ Not only would the predicted increase in their number create an unprecedented problem for the maintenance of public order—through an added influx of the proletariat—but also in terms of general military discipline, which was sorely lacking among this category of recruit.

Indeed, as André Grisard put it, ‘society was being defended by those who had nothing to defend’, leading to the conclusion that replacement and substitution were the root of the army’s disciplinary issues.³⁴ Figures from the 1867 Commission’s Sub-Committee supported this view. It suggested that out of every 100 men who deserted, 63 were replacements and substitutes, 19 were *miliciens*, and 18 were volunteers. Equally, for every 100 men sent to the Disciplinary Companies, 71 were replacements and substitutes, 15 were *miliciens*, and 14 were volunteers.³⁵ Given that there were proportionally fewer replacements and substitutes in the army than *miliciens*, the evidence clearly supports the premise. In terms of social composition, figures from an 1868 sample substantiates this view. Whereas 59.1% of *miliciens* belonged to the unskilled and labouring classes, they constituted 67.2% of replacements. The proportion of labourers among substitutes was generally in line with the *miliciens* at 57.7%.³⁶ This demonstrates how the weight of the ‘blood tax’ fell

³² Ibid.; see also De Vos and Bastin, ‘Tirage au Sort’, p. 43.

³³ Comm 1866, 20th Meeting, 2 May 1867.

³⁴ A. Grisard, *Histoire de l’Armée Belge de 1830 à nos Jours. Tome I De 1830 à 1919* (Tournai, 1982), p. 151.

³⁵ Comm 1866, Report by the Sub-Committee, 20 March 1867.

³⁶ Figures computed from a database of 14,848 entries derived from the matriculation books held at the MRA. Three years were selected, 1868 (3,460 entries), 1908 (3,447 entries), and 1913 (7,941 entries) to reflect the evolving composition of the rank and file incorporated for those given years across the ballot system, voluntary recruitment, and uni-

Table 4.1 Previous Civilian Occupations of Recruits, 1868–1913, in Percentage Terms

<i>Year</i>	<i>Professions</i>	<i>Shopmen/clerks</i>	<i>Mechanics</i>	<i>Manufacturing artisans</i>	<i>Labourers</i>	<i>Boys</i>
1868	4.6	5.2	13.7	16.2	59.5	0.8
1908	7.0	10.7	19.5	11.9	50.3	0.6
1913	13.3	12.7	19.4	9.7	44.5	0.4

disproportionately on the lower classes of society, corroborating, in part, De Vos' suggestion that it was largely the commercial classes, skilled labourers from industry, and artisans who sought to buy their way out of military service.³⁷

A general appreciation of the rank-and-file's social composition may be gleaned from Table 4.1. The proportion of unskilled labourers significantly outstripped any other grouping under the ballot system (1868 sample) and were only mildly weakened by the introduction of voluntary enlistment (1908 sample), and universal conscription (1913 sample). Whereas a drop of 15% is significant, it merely reflected the evolving occupational trends over the same period.³⁸ Similar observations can be made for the decrease in artisanal practice and rise of 'mechanics', with trades such as electricians, machine operators, and automobile drivers becoming ever more prevalent.

versal conscription. A mixture of regiments from across all branches of the service were selected to reflect, in general terms, the makeup of the army. The same regiments were used for all three samples, though in some cases, missing books resulted in some incomplete samples. For 1868, these included: 2nd, 5th, 6th, and 9th LIRs, 1st Grenadiers, and 2nd *Chasseurs à Cheval*. To this was added: 2nd Guides, 4th Artillery, and 2nd Engineers for 1908 and 1913 (though, for the latter, the 5th LIR was missing). For ease, occupations were broken down into six categories, following Edward Spiers' model in *Late Victorian Army*, p. 130. They are the following: (1) professionals, (2) shop men/clerks, (3) mechanics (including trades such as smiths and carpenters), (4) manufacturing artisans (including cloth-makers, lace-makers and weavers), (5) labourers (including domestic and agricultural servants), and (6) boys under the age of 17. All unreferenced figures quoted hereafter are results taken from this database.

³⁷ De Vos, *Het Effectief*, p. 61.

³⁸ *Statistique de la Belgique: Population Recensement Général (31 Décembre 1910), Tome I*, pp. 247–251. Although occupational groupings are slightly different and distinguishing, for example, labourers from factory workers is difficult, there is an appreciation of the professional (broadly 10.8%) and commercial (17.28%—reduced to 9.1% if discounting its labourers) elements of the male workforce. The prominence of industry is also noticeable, and explains the high number of 'mechanics'.

Interestingly, there appears to have been a concerted effort to siphon off this skilled workforce for the Engineers. Whereas the ‘mechanics’ made up 19.5% of the 1908 and 19.4% of the 1913 intakes, respectively, they comprised 38.7% and 38% of recruits incorporated into the Engineers. More outstanding, though, is the distinct underrepresentation of the professional and commercial classes under the ballot system, accounting for just 4.6% and 5.2% of the 1868 class, respectively. This was well below their proportion of the national workforce and proves how prevalent they were in purchasing replacements and substitutions. Although a slight increase in their military participation was discernible in 1908, it was not until the full effects of universal conscription in 1913 were felt that they became truly represented.

The initial upturn in professional and commercial participation in the 1908 remains significant, however. As will be discussed later, it reflected a conscious decision among the bourgeoisie to counter the threat of socialism from the mid-1880s, where their interests were seemingly threatened by an overly proletariat army.³⁹ However, the rank and file under the ballot system was characterised by the absence of the educated classes. Contemporaries were increasingly aware that intelligent recruits were a prerequisite to success on the open battlefield but that society’s lack of militarisation was unlikely to furnish them in any great numbers. Instead, replacement and substitution ensured a constant stream of poorly educated recruits in their stead.

The links between social class and education were magnified in the army, with many believing the dominance of labourers in the ranks as being the source of inefficiency and lack of discipline. This took on an even greater resonance during the ‘school wars’ during the 1840s. The function of elementary schooling in nineteenth century Europe was threefold: to train individuals to abandon their local ties in order to become citizens of nation-states; to forget their patois in place of the dominant language; and to moralise the people. Yet, a solid current of thought among conservatives was that there was no morality without religion and that over-education would simply encourage pride, ambition, and anarchy.⁴⁰

³⁹ De Vos, *Het Effectief*, pp. 223–230.

⁴⁰ R. Gildea, *Barricades and Borders: Europe 1800–1914* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996), pp. 239–240.

This was certainly the case in Belgium where, since 1842, clerical schooling had dominated the sector. Rural Flanders, in particular, became wedded to a religious curriculum after the 1879 ‘law of evil’, which sought to compromise with the Liberals over education. It created ‘a groundswell of popular protest by lower and middle class Catholics’ who prioritised Christian morality over the more rounded education favouring languages, arts, and sciences found in the country’s secular institutions.⁴¹

The results, from an intellectual point of view, were far from satisfactory. In 1882 men from that year’s levy, both literate and not, were asked a series of simple questions to test their degree of education. When asked where London could be found, 89% were unaware that it was the capital of England. When asked who lost the Battle of Waterloo, 16% did not know. When asked about the electoral system, 76% were ignorant of what system Belgium operated under. Curiously, as well, there were five different answers given to the question: ‘Did Moses live before or after Jesus Christ?’⁴² For its opponents, this was vindication that clerical schooling had failed and that the time was right to push, once more, for compulsory education.

Similar opinions were articulated in the press. In 1898, the editor of *La Lutte—De Strijd*, for example, expressed genuine concern regarding the literacy rates in Belgium compared to other ‘civilised’ countries. He believed the Catholics had systematically undermined scholarly practice despite evidence that morality, as preached in the clerical system, was not producing sufficiently educated men for a modern army. The newspaper claimed that in 1881 Belgium had 207 illiterates per 1,000 soldiers under arms. This compared poorly to other countries of a similar size, which boasted a mere 23 in Switzerland, 4 in Sweden, and 3 in Denmark. A decade later, Belgium had 159, to France’s 74 and Germany’s 2.4.⁴³

In 1912, *Le Progrès* printed a similar article entitled ‘The Illiterates in the German and Belgian Armies’, which took note of the disparity in the figures as well. It placed Belgium a long way behind Germany, Britain, and France whose respective proportions of illiterates per 10,000 men were just 2, 109, and 350, while Belgium stood at a less than impressive 1,137.

⁴¹ C. Strikwerda, ‘The Low Countries: Between City and the Volk’, in T. Baycroft and M. Hewitson (eds.), *What Is a Nation? Europe 1789–1914* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006), pp. 89–90.

⁴² P.P.R., 16 May 1899.

⁴³ *La Lutte—De Strijd*, 23 April 1898.

This was still better than the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which reportedly had 2,800, Italy 3,100, and Russia an astonishing 6,208.⁴⁴ Despite demonstrating a gradual improvement over time, the year 1870 was a watershed that marked a discernible rise in the country's literacy rates. Prussia had won the war in the classroom, and Belgium, like France, recognising the importance of a literate and intelligent army to the outcome of the next war, reacted accordingly.⁴⁵ The former Liberal Premier, Jean-Baptiste Nothomb, was quoted as saying in 1873 that 'the best educated armies will be the best'.⁴⁶ Even Russia, firmly set in its monarchical despotism, introduced reforms with the primary aim of educating its illiterate peasant masses in 1874.⁴⁷

Nonetheless, the 'school of the nation' could only do so much with what it was given. Many felt that more time was spent undoing the damage of clerical antimilitarism than on essential military training. Calls to rid public schools of religious influence were rife and formed a large part of the Liberal agenda in the second half of the nineteenth century. The inauguration of the Education League in 1864 was just one step encouraging education to become neutral in religious matters and to provide a more moral and civic instruction aimed at producing dutiful citizens. Branches extended to France in 1866 and Italy in 1870. It formed part of a wider European movement in which the National Education League in Britain saw nonconformists and radicals remove the catechism in rate-supported schools under the 1870 Education Act, with Liberals following suit in Italy in 1877, Belgium in 1879, and France in 1882.⁴⁸ Even though progress was slowly being made in a scholastic sense, military reformers, seeking to ride the social winds of change, faced a wall of opposition. The combination of education and military reform, as enacted in France with the introduction of universal conscription and the abolition

⁴⁴ *Le Progrès*, 14 January 1912. These figures largely match those published by the Ministry of the Interior computed from statistical data in *Exposé 1860, Tome II*, p. 414; *Exposé 1875, Tome II*, p. 9; as well as *Statistique Générale de la Belgique: Exposé de la Situation du Royaume de 1876 à 1900 Rédigé sous la Direction de la Commission Centrale de Statistique, Tome II*, p. 258.

⁴⁵ Porch, *March to the Marne*, pp. 32–37; E. Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014), pp. 8–9.

⁴⁶ P.P.R., 15 May 1873.

⁴⁷ H. Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (Unwin Hyman Ltd., London, 1983), p. 110.

⁴⁸ Gildea, *Barricades and Borders*, pp. 239–240.

of replacement in 1872, brought its own set of problems. In Belgium, fears that personal service would induce calls for universal male suffrage were enough to dampen the spirit of reform. Although an extension of voting rights was granted in 1893, the complete disappearance of clerical education and the ballot system struggled for traction amid the Catholic monopolisation of power from 1884 onwards.

The difference between Catholics and Liberals in the post-Unionist era was largely encapsulated in this debate. Fundamentally, it centred on differing interpretations of the Constitution. For the Liberals, freedom of religion meant keeping the Church and State very much separate, allowing minorities to practice their faiths and go about their daily lives unhindered. For Catholics, faith was at the very core of the nation and had to be promoted through schooling, poor relief, and burials. It has been argued that fear of clerical influence in day-to-day life among the liberal bourgeoisie saw the country polarise in geopolitical terms. The Liberal Party began to increase its base of support in urban centres, while the Catholics secured theirs from rural, agricultural interests. In due course, this created a framework within which separate Flemish and Walloon identifications were to develop, as industrial Wallonia overtook agrarian Flanders in economic terms.⁴⁹ It also laid the foundations for a civil-military battle that would define the second half of Belgium's long nineteenth century. The intersection of army and society was not solely a physical phenomenon experienced through military service, but an ideological battle between the two parties in which national defence was inexcusably held to ransom.

The Catholic Party, which had spent many years in opposition during the 1840s and 1850s, was the first to use army reform to gain a political advantage. Opposition, coupled with the rise of the clerical, antimilitarist, anti-Royalist, and pro-Flemish *Meeting Party*, which was encroaching on traditional Catholic voters, brought the Catholics together on the military question under the leadership of Jean-Baptiste Coomans. By the 1860s, it began advocating voluntary recruitment and the abolition of replacement with the aim of winning back the votes of those opposed to the 'blood tax', which was felt particularly heavily in the rural communities of Flanders. This attempt at introducing a measure of social equality to the recruitment process allowed the Catholics to make some gains on the

⁴⁹ L. Wils, *Histoire des nations belges. Belgique, Flandre, Wallonie: quinze siècles de passé commun* (Trans. C. Kesteloot, Quorum, Ottignies, 1996), pp. 161–163.

Liberal Party but a defeat in the 1864 elections signalled a reversion to their former position on the matter as social issues returned to the fore.⁵⁰

Another defeat in the 1868 election saw the Catholics take up issues over which they could directly oppose the Liberals and fight to secure wavering votes. These included electoral reform and the army once again. This time, however, their key policies were lowering the military budget and reducing the annual levy from 12,000 to 10,000 men, and by extension the burden on society.⁵¹ From this point on, the Catholics were diametrically opposed to the idea of conscription. They came to embody antimilitaristic sentiment, relegating the importance of national defence while promoting the values of a clerical society that would want to have little, or nothing, to do with the army. By adopting such an approach to the military question, new battle lines were drawn between the Liberals on the one hand and the Catholics, supported by the Antwerp *Meetingsers*, on the other. This rapprochement would see the Catholic Party become closely linked with the rise of Flemish-consciousness within army and society, which further complicated questions of reform as the century drew to a close.

The campaign for personal service emerged as a public debate amid Prussian military successes in the 1860s. The 1867 Commission examined the evidence of the campaigns in Schleswig-Holstein and Austria and concluded that Moltke's victories lay in the organisation and structure of his armies. Proposals for the introduction of voluntary enlistment were soon brushed aside because it could not provide sufficient numbers for the task at hand. If anything, the army needed to increase in size and, more to the point, the importance of a substantial reserve became *sine qua non*.⁵² Conscription was the desired solution, but was recognised as being inadmissible to the political parties and the electorate. To achieve the requisite effective strength of 100,000 men, however, the annual levy would need to be raised from 12,000 to 14,500 men if replacement and substitution were to be maintained. Their draining effect on manpower was estimated to be as high as 1,500 men per year, with the figure of 13,000 men deemed the minimum contingent strength were they to be abolished. Proposals for a supplementary reserve of 2,000 volunteers each year, spending just seven months under arms before being furloughed, was gen-

⁵⁰ De Vos and Bastin, 'Tirage au Sort', pp. 47–48.

⁵¹ C. Woeste, *Mémoires pour servir à l'Histoire Contemporaine de la Belgique 1859–1894*, Vol I (Brussels, 1927), p. 88.

⁵² Comm 1866, 19th Meeting, 1 May 1867.

erally favoured, but the suggestion that *miliciens* would need to spend at least 27 months with the colours was deemed too inconvenient by the Commission's civilian members.⁵³ The officers present rejected these notions. General Renard demonstrated that raising the annual contingent to just 13,000 would still create a proportionally lighter burden than that witnessed in 1840.⁵⁴ As would be the case for the next half century, though, military voices fell on deaf civilian ears. Substitution and replacement were unquestionably an evil, but society would not yet countenance a move towards the nation-in-arms.

The 1871 Commission set up to examine questions relative to the organisation of the army was, again, unwavering in its opinion that Belgium should adopt the Prussian model and abolish the ballot system. Other European armies had already done, or were in the process of doing, just that. Brialmont rightly stated: '[F]ar from leading other countries, we are, on the contrary, being led by them'.⁵⁵ The Recruitment Sub-Committee presented figures suggesting that Belgium possessed both the manpower and financial means to accomplish it. Yet, the problem was in convincing the Government and society of its necessity. New proposals to raise the annual contingent to 14,000 men were, once more, spurned based on its unnecessary impact on society. Yet, calculations suggested that such an increase would still only recruit one in every 352 of the population, which compared rather favourably to other European nations. In 1871–1872, Austria raised one in 341 head of population; Italy one in 319; Denmark one in 317; the Northern Confederation one in 312; Wurttemberg one in 305; Bavaria one in 301; the Netherlands one in 299; Russia one in 250; France one in 233; and Switzerland one in 205. Additionally, while under Dutch rule, the Belgian populace had had to contend with supplying one recruit for every 300 inhabitants. Even immediately after independence, they had been required to supply one in 366, which was not far removed from the proportions now being advocated.⁵⁶ Compared to the one in 498 experienced in 1866, and even the one in 413 in 1869, following an increase to the contingent from 10,000 to

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Comm 1871, 8th Meeting, 14 June 1871.

⁵⁶ AER POS.2871-521, Malou Papers, Report compiled by the Sub-Committee charged with presenting a Bill for the organisation of the army, 1872. Other figures suggest an incremental decrease from 1/341 in 1832 to 1/359 by 1839; see De Vos, *Het Effectief*, p. 378.

12,000, it still seemed a high price to pay.⁵⁷ It demonstrated to the military authorities how ruinous the increasing wealth of the country had been to the army in the promulgation of laxity among the population, its representatives, and their collective trust in the power of neutrality.

The arguments in favour of raising the contingent and introducing personal and obligatory service appeared sound and beyond contestation. Even the future Catholic Premier, Jules Malou, was convinced of its necessity and garnered clerical support through the powerful Archbishop of Mechelen, who traditionally was opposed to military excesses. This caused a veritable split in the party as some intractable members of the Right felt compelled to follow the clergy's position, while others remained wedded to their personal principles.⁵⁸ The Premier, Barthélémy de Theux de Meylandt, was unmoved and refused to sanction the Commission's proposals, lest the Catholic Party lose face among its supporters. Apart from a personal dislike for personal and obligatory service, de Theux felt duty-bound to honour the electoral promises made to fight any increases to the budget or size of the army. The Cabinet was split over the issue, but only the Minister of War, Henri Guillaume, was prepared to follow his convictions and attempt to push through the Commission's proposals. As a military man, Guillaume knew how precarious Belgian neutrality was without a strong army to uphold it—events in 1870 had shown that. But, as a known Liberal sympathiser and a staunch ally of the King, to whom he owed his office, he was not trusted by many of his Cabinet colleagues. Guillaume faced overwhelming adversity from de Theux, who threatened to resign were he forced to introduce conscription.⁵⁹ Naturally, the King could not allow the Government to fall over an issue to which he had personally lent his support. As such, it fell to Guillaume to make the decision to stand by his convictions and tender his own resignation in November 1872.

Guillaume was by no means made a scapegoat for the failure of the conscriptionist lobby to force through reform. If anything, it galvanised the resolve of its members. Indeed, determined to stand by their colleague, senior officers refused the offer to take up the portfolio of the Minister of War. They were not prepared to see the qualified opinions of the Commission cast aside for political gains, while the army and national

⁵⁷ De Vos, *Het Effectief*, p. 379.

⁵⁸ MRA, Chazal Papers, F. 18/700, Brialmont to Chazal, 28 June 1873.

⁵⁹ Woeste, *Mémoires*, pp. 116–118; De Vos and Bastin, 'Tirage au Sort', p. 51.

defence continued to suffer. Four months passed before General Séraphin Thiebault agreed to step in on 25 March 1873. He was willing to temporarily drop the issue of personal service but was intent on instituting other changes. His primary focus was to tighten the regulations of State replacement to curb its abuses, and to restore the time under arms to 30 months. The latter was naturally opposed, but the former made some progress given its compliance with Catholic military policy. In all, the 1872–1873 reform debate boiled down to a messy, though successful, defence of the replacement system. In the furore surrounding the situation, the question of personal service was somewhat relegated to the background of political affairs. Barring a brief revival in 1878 under General Auguste Goethals, it would not resurface in any significant fashion until 1886.⁶⁰ For the time being, the Catholics had held the line.

This hiatus in the military debate was largely a result of the Liberal victory in the 1878 election, which saw the political agendas of both parties shift dramatically towards education and social reform. By the time the Catholic Party regained power in 1884 under Jules Malou (for the second time), their traditional base of electoral support on army issues had swollen to include the emerging middle classes. Prosperity, through industrialisation and colonisation, had propelled the bourgeoisie to a level of financial power that allowed them to consistently buy replacements. It was precisely this group of money-driven merchants, shopkeepers, and artisans, content with demonstrating their patriotism through nominal service in the Civic Guard, whom the Catholics were able to rely on most against renewed pressure to abolish the ballot. It is not surprising, therefore, to see them extend their influence in the commercial centre of Antwerp and gradually align themselves with the *Meetingsers* whose antimilitarism was exemplified in their slogan ‘not one man, not one penny more’.

A series of workers’ strikes in 1886 created an unexpected jolt across the political spectrum and propelled military reform back into public consciousness. An economic depression caused the industrial Meuse basin to erupt into militant demonstrations, requiring military force to restore order.⁶¹ The fact that these events took place just a year after the establishment of a Belgian Workers Party (BWP) was significant. Although the BWP was not directly involved in the 1886 troubles, these events helped to validate its existence and ensured its continued presence in rallying

⁶⁰Woeste, *Mémoires*, p. 121.

⁶¹Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, pp. 167–169.

popular support for universal suffrage in the coming years. It demonstrated to the urban bourgeoisie that there was a workers' question that could no longer be ignored.⁶² The dangers of riotous masses supported by what was becoming an increasingly proletarian army appeared to threaten internal stability and their cherished way of life. Already, the 1871 Commission had provided examples of political meetings being staged at the Beverloo camp, and cases of soldiers openly refusing to use their weapons on assembled crowds in aid of the civil power.⁶³ More contemporaneously, 60 men of the 3rd LIR stationed in Ghent in 1886 were reported to have participated in meetings at the *Vooruit*, the cultural centre of the city's labour movement.⁶⁴ With their interests under siege, the middle classes began to voluntarily send their sons to the army in greater numbers in the decades preceding the First World War. Under personal and obligatory service in 1913, for example, an astonishing 31.9% of voluntary enlistments came from the commercial classes, compared to just 8.6% of conscripts. This fits into the emerging narrative that Belgian society was becoming increasingly militarised by the eve of war.⁶⁵ Moreover, it also suggests that the educated classes were, like their counterparts across Europe, eager to express their patriotism following tense years of international rivalry. It was precisely the urban bourgeoisie which historians have identified as the social group most likely to have been caught up in expression of nationalistic fervour in 1914.⁶⁶ As such, previously unthinkable support for obligatory service prior to 1886, became more acceptable as the middle classes sought to maintain the status quo in both domestic and foreign affairs.

This shift in attitude saw the political situation surrounding compulsion become a veritable battle between the urban middle classes who were now more favourable to the idea, and the antimilitaristic Flemish rural population supported by the city of Antwerp that refused to countenance any further military increases.⁶⁷ This fear of socialism was, in fact, the catalyst

⁶² L. Musin, 'Le Parti ouvrier belge et les élections du 2 juin 1912', in Destatte, Lanneau, and Meurant-Pailhe (eds.), *Jules Destrée. Le Lettre au roi, et au-delà 1912–2012*, p. 25.

⁶³ Comm 1871, 4th Meeting, 21 May 1871.

⁶⁴ *Le Bien Public*, 5 June 1886; *Journal de Bruxelles*, 30 July 1886; *Le Peuple*, 2 August 1886.

⁶⁵ de Mûelenaere, 'An Uphill Battle', pp. 156–157.

⁶⁶ A. Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary at War, 1914–1918* (Allen Lane, London, 2014), pp. 83–88.

⁶⁷ De Vos, *Het Effectief*, pp. 230–252.

needed for some in the Catholic Party to take heed of the arguments put forward in the 1870s by the military advisors. The Catholic Premier, Auguste Beernaert, for example, was a known advocate of universal conscription having been convinced of its social and military value by General Van der Smissen—the man charged with quelling the 1886 riots. It was reasoned that the army would not only benefit from being a more accurate incarnation of the nation by including all classes but, that in doing so, it would provide a buffer against the spread of socialism. For decades the army had suggested that, as a ‘school of the nation’ it would provide a corporate education for its youthful recruits, inculcating the virtues of discipline, morality, and duty.⁶⁸ Only in the wake of socialist unrest did it begin to resonate with transigent Catholic sensibilities. Some of the more conservative elements of the Catholic Party, however, remained unconvinced. They did not wish to see the pious youth of Flanders any more exposed to the corruptive influences of socialist Walloons than was absolutely necessary.⁶⁹ With universal conscription likely to increase the proportion of Flemish recruits to approximately 65%, it was vital that traditional Catholic and conservative values be maintained lest society descend into complete anarchy.

Barrack life, at the best of times, was universally despised for its unsanitary conditions, let alone the morally degrading effects it had on innocent rural boys co-opted into its reprehensible activities.⁷⁰ The presence of army chaplains allowed the Catholics to rest easier in the knowledge that agents of the faith were on hand to spiritually guide these soldiers through their time with the colours. Still, even this was threatened by Liberal policies during the civil–military debates of the mid-to-late nineteenth century. In 1834, the army employed just two Catholic

⁶⁸ Comm 1871, 3rd Meeting, 17 May 1871. Major Guillaume even expressed this feeling as early as 1852 stating that conscription placed the nation in the army, Rec Comm 1852, p. 27; H. A. Brialmont, *Le Service Obligatoire par un Colonel de l'Armée* (Brussels, 1871), pp. 28–29.

⁶⁹ J. Gooch, *Armies in Europe* (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1980), p. 127.

⁷⁰ For more on the links between hygiene and morality in Belgian civil and military milieus in the nineteenth century, see J. Vandendriessche, ‘Ophthalmia Crossing Borders: Belgian Army Doctors between the Military and Civilian Society, 1830–1860’, *Journal of Belgian History*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2016), pp. 48–71; for more general information on barrack life, see L. De Vos, ‘Het Dagelijkse Leven van de Belgische Soldaat 1830–1848’, *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 24, no. 5 (1982), pp. 465–494, and no. 6 (1982), pp. 529–560; Hoegaerts, *Masculinity and Nationhood*, p. 51.

military chaplains, but by 1881 this had risen to 41. For Catholics, chaplaincy became a political issue worth noting.

Catholic voters were keen to ensure that the sons they were entrusting to the army, and by extension the State, were well provided for.⁷¹ With the rise of Liberal political influence, however, the expanding group of military chaplains saw their role drastically curtailed. On 9 April 1881, six chaplains were relieved of their duties and the remainder restricted in their influence. Administratively they were moved from the Ministry of War to the Ministry of Justice on the pretext of budgetary savings.⁷² It resulted in fewer chaplains being allowed to tend to the spiritual needs of the same number of soldiers on a more infrequent basis, directly reducing religious influence in the army. For Catholics, it was antagonistic and undermined the 'foundations of one of the firmest supports of [Belgian] nationality'.⁷³ It placed the onus on the individual soldier to be self-disciplined in his religious practice and to seek out local priests in his own time. Large sections of the predominantly Liberal officer corps, however, were known to systematically prevent men from observing their religious duties by arranging exercises that confined men to barracks while services or ceremonies were being held. Constrained on two fronts, Catholic soldiers found it increasingly difficult to regularly access the spiritual guidance to which they had grown accustomed in their local communities. This both alienated them from the values and customs of their homes and simultaneously steered them into the clutches of the perceived evils of the barracks and its corruptive elements.

Intransigent Catholics felt vindicated in their opposition to personal service throughout the 1880s. Despite the Law of 25 June 1889 restoring military chaplains to their former positions, it was clear that the military burden had to be kept to a bare minimum to protect society. Nevertheless, a schism had emerged in the Catholic Party concerning the question of universal conscription that threatened to bring down the Beernaert Government. In 1886, several local associations proclaimed themselves anticonscriptionist and pressured their representatives in Parliament to follow suit. Indeed, they threatened to no longer elect anyone who would

⁷¹ P.P.R., 18 April 1845.

⁷² J. R. Leconte, *L'Aumônerie militaire belge: Son évolution de l'époque hollandaise à l'organisation actuelle* (Musée Royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire Militaire, Brussels, 1967), p. 17.

⁷³ P.P.R., 23 February 1881. This Liberal policy also extended to civilian life where they attempted to reduce the size of the clergy by up to 30%.

not represent their point of view on the matter.⁷⁴ The message was loud and clear. To introduce universal conscription would result in a loss of the electorate's confidence and support.

Such aggressive politicking reflected the power of the 140,000 voters whose social status, as one pamphleteer wrote, deprived them of the ability to consider anything but themselves.⁷⁵ Beernaert was forced to call a meeting of the Catholic Party at the Hotel Mérode to discuss the division within the party. He had taken power on the back of promises to be supported in his endeavours as Prime Minister, which had now been broken. He particularly resented being dictated to by the associations and threatened to resign. For the good of the party Beernaert was convinced to remain and lead the Government but at the expense of temporarily dropping his personal designs to introduce conscription until at least after the next election.⁷⁶ The personal defeat significantly undermined Beernaert who, it was widely considered, had lost control of the party. His influence and standing had certainly fallen but inadvertently led to the acceptance of an increased military budget for the creation of the Meuse fortresses. After all, the Prime Minister could not be seen to suffer multiple defeats from within his own party in under a year.⁷⁷ This was yet another demonstration of how political pressure, this time from within a single party, proved detrimental to the implementation of personal and obligatory service.

Around the same time, leading socialists were advocating the 'nation-in-arms' concept as a viable alternative to recruitment by ballot. It had the potential to answer to the nation's demands for shorter service, a much-reduced standing army, the abolition of the corruptive barracks, while still arming a larger number of men than was currently the case. Its main advantage, though, was to reduce the time spent under arms to just three months. Georges Lorand was perhaps the most prominent supporter of the system and drew inspiration from the Swiss cantonal militia system, which he had personally observed.⁷⁸ From the age of 16, his system envisaged boys learning the fundamentals of military life through education, gymnastics, marches, dress code, and shooting. Early exposure to discipline

⁷⁴Woeste, *Mémoires*, pp. 340–341.

⁷⁵Anonymous, *Les Partis Anvers et la Défense Nationale* (Spineux & Cie, Brussels, 1890), pp. 11–12.

⁷⁶Woeste, *Mémoires*, pp. 327 and 340–341.

⁷⁷Ibid., pp. 358–359.

⁷⁸G. Lorand, *Nation Armée: le Système Suisse* (Brussels, 1889).

and routine would instil the basics into the male population who, at the age of 20, would go on to form the first band of the army proper. Each year approximately 27,000 men would be expected to undertake a three-month training course, with those deemed to be inept returning for further instruction until proving satisfactory knowledge and capacity. A small group of full-time officers and NCOs, who would form the spine of the army during peace, would undertake the task of exercising each year's recruits as well as the periods of 28-day recalls every two years. Men between the ages of 20 and 28 would form the 'regular army', with 29- to 32-year-olds acting as a reserve. Once over this age threshold, it was expected that all men would nominally serve in the Civic Guard until the age of 50. This would allow the population to retain its civilian roles and prospects while equally having received basic military training. In Lorand's own words: 'The army would be the nation itself and we will see develop in the public, for all things military, that same sympathy, that same enthusiasm that we find in Switzerland'.⁷⁹

Detractors from both sides of the political divide were unconvinced. The Liberal leader Walthère Frère-Orban, for example, saw little difference between the nation-in-arms and universal conscription on a social level, but questioned the logic of a three-month stint with the colours.⁸⁰ Similarly, elements of the Catholic press suggested that it went against Belgian traditions, morals, and character, as well as the social, religious, industrial, and agricultural requirements of the country.⁸¹ Ultimately, it satisfied neither military policy nor reflected the desires of their electoral support, which feared socialism's rise to prominence.

Similar concerns in Italy initially precluded the introduction of conscription for fear of widening the political nation and threatening the established order.⁸² In Belgium, the battle for universal suffrage outpaced the military debate. Conscriptionists and supporters of the nation-in-arms agreed that military service was 'a duty as well as a right', but differed on the strength and utility of the armed forces.⁸³ A citizen army, which demanded service from all classes of society, required an extension of the

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 65.

⁸⁰ P.P.R., 23 March 1893.

⁸¹ *Le Bien Public*, 22 February 1884.

⁸² J. Gooch, *Army, State and Society in Italy, 1870–1915* (Macmillan Press, Basingstoke, 1989), p. 1.

⁸³ P.P.R., 30 November 1911.

franchise. This was achieved in April 1893 but in the form of tempered universal suffrage that worked on a plural vote system. This saw 60% of the electoral body receive one vote, 23% two votes, and 17% three votes based on a combination of wealth, social, and occupational status. The number of electors jumped from 135,000 to 1,370,687 and the number of votes to 2,111,127. Socialist votes soared and actually saw the party send eight more representatives to Parliament than the Liberals after the 1894 election.⁸⁴ Unfortunately for the conscriptionist lobby, the introduction of tempered universal male suffrage did not abolish the ballot. It was not enough for the likes of Émile Féron, the left-leaning Liberal from Brussels, who suggested: 'Those who wish to remain free must guard against an army which is not national; the army of a free people must be the incarnation of the said people'.⁸⁵ The Catholics had survived the political scare and actually emerged in a stronger position to guard against military reform in the coming years.

As it was, the entire military reorganisation debate boiled down to a political struggle, which allowed the successive antimilitarist and anti-Royalist Catholic Governments to dictate affairs. Despite senior officers endlessly expressing their professional opinions in favour of obligatory service, there was no real sense that the politicians seriously contemplated its implementation. In 1897, Brialmont, once again spearheading the charge, set up a committee composed of five retired generals, two presidents of ex-NCOs associations, and the director of *La Belgique Militaire*. He proposed to unite more than 250 veterans' associations into one federation for a propaganda campaign in favour of personal service. Writing to the King's secretary beforehand, Brialmont suggested that this would 'rouse the slumbering patriotism of the nation and will present the King with the means to realise His good intentions towards the army'.⁸⁶ In search of political capital they took their petition to the King on 13 June 1897 and gained verbal support for their endeavours.

⁸⁴The 1894 election saw 900,000 Catholic votes elect 104 deputies, 300,000 Socialist votes elect 28 deputies, and 500,000 Liberal votes elect 20 deputies; see S. B. Clough, *A History of the Flemish Movement in Belgium: A Study in Nationalism* (R. R. Smith Inc., New York, 1986), pp. 135–136.

⁸⁵P.P.R., 7 March 1894.

⁸⁶RA, Archives du Cabinet du Roi—Règne de Léopold II, 2182, Brialmont to King's Secretary, 26 February 1897.

Leopold II famously stated: 'You are preaching to the converted. ...I am, and shall remain, the vanguard of us patriots'.⁸⁷ This was naturally welcomed but, as had traditionally been the case throughout his reign, amounted to little in reality. Constitutionally bound to remain above party politics, Leopold's support for the conscriptionist lobby was limited by his personal ambitions in the Congo, which were held to ransom by the Catholic Government over military and social issues.⁸⁸ With his expansionist desires overriding those of military reorganisation, the King remained an enthusiastic but silent bystander.

Beyond the political opposition facing Brialmont and his colleagues was the Belgian peace movement, which gathered pace during the 1890s. Having held the first-ever European pacifist meeting in 1848, Brussels became the headquarters for numerous nongovernmental organisations dedicated to the protection of cultural, humanitarian, professional, and religious interests worldwide.⁸⁹ Former Catholic Premier, Auguste Beernaert, was heavily involved as the first president of the Interparliamentary Union, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in 1909. There were principally two main groups involved in Belgium's pre-war movement—educated middle class men and socialists. The former sought to retain the status quo and avoid any upheaval that might threaten free trade unless, of course, it was a matter of national defence. The latter, by contrast, were splintered into two subgroups, both intent on undermining capitalist society, which, in their minds, was the root cause of all war. International peace and social peace were closely bound to one another but could only be achieved by overthrowing the capitalist system. One group favoured militant strike action and revolution, while the other sought more moderate reform of capitalist society.⁹⁰ The impact of these

⁸⁷H. A. Brialmont, *Solution de la Question Militaire en Belgique* (Brussels, 1901), pp. 17–18.

⁸⁸Woeste, *Mémoires*, pp. 315–316. See also, Viaene, 'King Leopold's Imperialism', pp. 741–790.

⁸⁹R. Chickering, *Imperial Germany and a World Without War: The Peace Movement and German Society, 1892–1914* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1975), pp. 8–9; D. Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium, 1880–1930: Peace, Progress and Prestige* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2013), pp. 148–153.

⁹⁰N. Lubelski-Bernard, 'The Participation of Women in the Belgian Peace Movement (1830–1914)', in R. Roach Pierson (ed.), *Women and Peace: Theoretical, Historical and Practical Perspectives* (Croom Helm, London, New York, Sydney, 1987), pp. 81–84.

groups is difficult to measure, but their very existence is suggestive of a need to dampen a contemporaneous spirit of militarism within society. After all, it has been shown that prewar pacifism and militarism were 'converse aspects of the same problem, which centred upon conflicting orientations toward international relations'.⁹¹ Jan Vermeiren has recently suggested that the presence or absence of women in the discourse of war and peace can shed light on the state of militarisation of certain societies.⁹² Given that women's participation in the Belgian peace movement had overtaken that of men in terms of numbers, propaganda, and activity by 1914, it would imply that the process was yet to fully mature.⁹³ Events of 1886 certainly had caused the bourgeoisie to accept the role of the army in society, but the uniform and epaulets did not yet command the same respect as they did in more militaristic societies such as Germany.

Still, by 1901, enough pressure was being exerted on the Government by the army to institute another commission to examine the question of recruitment. The Catholic Premier, Paul de Smet de Naeyer during his second term in office, was determined to oppose the introduction of personal service, despite renewed interest in the matter.⁹⁴ In fact, he was a known advocate of voluntary recruitment and low military expenditure, preferring to trust in the power of neutrality. Knowing that the Commission was likely to push for universal conscription, the Premier called on the intransigent Catholic trio of Charles Woeste, Joris Helleputte, and Auguste Delbeke to sit as his representatives. Fearing a personal and political defeat, Woeste raised some reservations about joining the Commission but was mollified by de Smet de Naeyer's suggestion that they could 'choose two-thirds or even three-quarters of politicians [who were] hostile to personal service' to join as its civilian

⁹¹ Chickering, *Imperial Germany*, p. 387.

⁹² J. Vermeiren, *The First World War and German National Identity: The Dual Alliance at War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016), pp. 19–20.

⁹³ Lubelski-Bernard, 'The Participation of Women', pp. 85–86.

⁹⁴ The Minister of War, Jacques-Joseph Brasseur, had actually tried to push conscription through twice while in office in 1894 and again in 1896 during which time the Catholic Party had been severely divided over a multitude of political issues. He even managed to get partial Church support for the matter but was initially rebuffed by the King who thought it imprudent to cause a storm before the 1896 elections. When he tried again later that year, his proposals were rejected, provoking yet another Ministerial resignation over the issue. See Woeste, *Mémoires* Vol. II, pp. 22–23, 64, and 97–103.

representatives in order to obtain the right outcome.⁹⁵ Woeste and his colleagues accepted the offer. By the time the Commission sat for its meeting, there were 20 civilian members of whom the majority were known to be openly opposed to personal service.

The Commission discussed several proposals from both the military and civilian lobbies present. Curiously, the underlying theme of these discussions concerned forging a national spirit, which had been sorely lacking from the passive obedience inherent in the aged ballot system.⁹⁶ Despite the opinion of Paul Hymans and others that '[a]n army of volunteers is an army outside the nation, an instrument of reaction and of *coups d'État*', there were others who argued that liberty of vocations was a cherished Belgian ideal, making voluntary recruitment the most amenable form of military service. Helleputte was among those who stated that, from now on, those who enlisted would do so by choice and treat it as a respectable professional career.⁹⁷

The more reasonable proposition was that put forward by the military presence on the committee—namely, the immediate implementation of personal and obligatory military service. The proposal included raising the annual contingent to 18,000 men in a bid to achieve a wartime establishment of 180,000, which was deemed both a realistic and necessary target by Major Victor Ducarne.⁹⁸ Even some of the Catholic members of the committee began to subscribe to the idea. The Count de Mérode Westerloo, for example, stated that he would support personal service on the condition that the law exempt all members of the clergy and teachers.⁹⁹ With the tide turning in favour of universal conscription, Woeste, Helleputte, and Delbeke attempted to leave the Commission before it recommend a policy with which they could not be associated. This triggered a series of events, which resulted in the clearest manifestation to date of military requirements and national defence being marginalised for political gains. In a letter to the Minister of War on 20 February 1901, the Catholic trio stated that they would not take any responsibility for the consequences of the Committee's impending decision.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 201.

⁹⁶ P.P.R., 18 May 1869.

⁹⁷ Comm 1901, 17th Meeting, 28 April 1901; *La Belgique Militaire*, 5 January 1902.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 14th Meeting, 10 April 1901.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 17th Meeting, 28 April 1901.

¹⁰⁰ AER S.2505-360, Woeste, Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, Helleputte, Delbeke to Cousebandt d'Alkemade, 20 February 1901.

Woeste's name carried a lot of weight in the conservative wings of the party and among its local associations in Flanders.¹⁰¹ The threat of resignation and personal defeat struck at the heart of the Catholic Party, which could not be seen to be divided again by the military question. De Smet de Naeyer, steadfast in his opinions, decided to back Woeste against the Commission, rejecting its proposals for universal conscription and garnering enough support to implement voluntary enlistment instead. Catholic reductions sought to create a peacetime force of just 30,000 men to be supplemented by an annual levy if necessary, while enrolling all 18- to 30-year-olds in the Civic Guard. Despite being woefully inadequate, the Catholic majority in the Chamber of Representatives was able to pass the Bill on 24 January 1902, with the Senate following suit on 20 March. It neither provided a suitable structure for the army to meaningfully uphold neutrality, nor did it eradicate the injustices of replacement. It did, however, solidify the Catholic monopolisation of power at a time when proportional representation threatened to turn the political tide against them.

This naturally prompted immediate reaction, particularly from the military sphere. *La Belgique Militaire* noted a week later:

The Military Law voted by the Chamber of Representatives is a party-political endeavour, an attack against the army. Four words suffice to characterise it: The Antwerp *Meetings* Approve. The nation's interests are cynically being sacrificed by a party, who, to have any chance of retaining power, has judged it necessary to present itself *en bloc* before its voters ahead of next May.¹⁰²

The fact that the article itself was entitled 'The Army Sacrificed to the Interests of a Party' is a clear demonstration of how sickening Catholic military policy had become to the army, which felt compelled to elucidate just how systematically their attempts at reform had been undermined since 1870. Civil-military relations were at their most strained from 1902 onwards and the army had become the Catholics' and *Meetings*' casualty.

The modified recruiting system, no longer faced with being seen as a burden on society, was able to lengthen its terms of engagement without arousing public consternation. Eight years with the colours and five in the reserve on decent pay and with a promise of a pensionable job on comple-

¹⁰¹ Woeste, *Mémoires* Vol. II, p. 222; De Vos and Bastin, 'Tirage au Sort', p. 55.

¹⁰² *La Belgique Militaire*, 2 February 1902.

tion of service was, according to the authorities, supposed to be an irresistible draw to the armed forces. As it was, it proved to be an abject failure. This was partly a result of the previously mentioned increase in public wealth, which meant that military pay rates remained uncompetitive, but also because of a culture of antimilitarism of 70 years in the making.¹⁰³ Volunteers, as had been the case in the 1830–1902 period, proved difficult to come by but the implementation of the new system was certainly not helped by the lack of enthusiasm shown by the army itself. Indeed, accusations of purposeful ill will abounded.¹⁰⁴ Reports were emanating from local districts that military authorities were doing everything in their power to prevent volunteers from enrolling. In Ghent, for example, around 80 men were turned away for one reason or another, while those who enlisted after 10 October were forced to wait until after the winter to be incorporated with the next intake.¹⁰⁵ In addition, wastage rates, which had been projected to amount to 5,507 men across the full 42,800-strength establishment, proved to be correct. Generals Marchal and Boël noted, respectively: ‘In certain regiments, we are unable to constitute a presentable company, let alone a battalion’; and ‘the situation in the cavalry is most serious’.¹⁰⁶ Foreign commentators also noted the detrimental effects that the period of voluntary recruiting had on the army. After observing the 1909 manoeuvres, Captain Duruy, the French Military Attaché to Brussels, noted that: ‘The army is not at the height of the role events may oblige it play....[I]f not innocuous, it can certainly be said to be of little danger to an invader’.¹⁰⁷

Skeletal units and growing international tension stimulated renewed campaigns against the voluntary system in favour of conscription, despite arguments that the reaction was premature. A large part of the expected success of the 1902 Law lay in the estimated desirability for the new professional soldier to reengage beyond his first term of service. Given that

¹⁰³ L. A. Lecleir, *L’Infanterie, Filiations et Traditions* (Service de l’historique des Forces armées belges, Brussels, 1973), p. 65.

¹⁰⁴ J. Hellebaut, *Mémoires du Lieutenant Général Joseph Hellebaut: Ancien Ministre de la Guerre* (Groemaere, Brussels, 1933), p. 72.

¹⁰⁵ *XXe Siècle*, 8 November 1902.

¹⁰⁶ *La Belgique Militaire*, 5 January 1902. They equally demonstrated how, in addition to wastage, the fact that men were only required for 22 months of service, the establishment over a two-year period would see a deficit of 1785 men.

¹⁰⁷ A. Duchesne, ‘Appréciations françaises sur la valeur de l’armée belge et les perspectives de guerre de 1871 à 1914’, *Carnet de la Fourragère*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1961), pp. 188–189.

reengagements had already been relatively common among volunteers under the ballot system, albeit with exceptionally limited numbers, it was not an improbable assumption that an increased number of them, now better paid, would seek to follow suit. It was quite rightly suggested, therefore, not to judge the system until at least 1910 so as to fairly assess how well it matured.¹⁰⁸ This would allow the first batch of reengagements to occur, which year on year would add strength in numbers to the annual intake of new volunteers. Yet, cracks began to appear beforehand that could not be ignored. Simply not enough volunteers were coming forward in the first instance, which all but made the debate over reengagements irrelevant. It was being reported that proponents of the scheme in Parliament were well aware of the deficiencies emerging from early recruitment figures. Moreover, they pressed provincial committees to override regimental doctors' decisions not to admit certain men on medical grounds in order to raise, albeit falsely, the number of volunteers joining the army.¹⁰⁹ It was plainly obvious that the experiment had not worked. Waiting until 1910 for the system to develop would have been a severe miscalculation of the threat posed by the international situation.

A commission was set up in 1908 to examine the 1902 Law. All that it found was a slight decline in the peacetime effective strength, which had fallen from a desired 42,800 to 35,200 men – though this was seen as being easily remedied.¹¹⁰ The new Catholic Premier, François Schollaert, called the members of the Right together to discuss the military question. Some were in favour of personal service; others merely called for the abolition of replacement. For the most part, they were keen to modify the 1902 Law. The proposal put forward—‘one man, one family’—inspired by a failed newspaper campaign run by *Le Bien Public* appealed to both Schollaert and his Minister of War, Joseph Hellebaut. Both laid claim to the idea, which purported to rid recruitment of the injustices of replacement by calling on every family to contribute towards what would become an increased establishment on a short-service basis.¹¹¹ From Schollaert's point of view, it was a good opportunity to distance himself from the 1902

¹⁰⁸ *La Belgique Militaire*, 5 January 1908.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 28 March 1909.

¹¹⁰ AER 1510/37-291, de Broqueville Papers, Report by Etaliez, 21 October 1912.

¹¹¹ Woeste, *Mémoires*, Vol. II, p. 351; Hellebaut, *Mémoires*, p. 85.

Law, which he fundamentally disliked, and Hellebaut to drive forward the cause of the conscriptionist lobby that had been ignored for too long.

Naturally, some opposition from certain wings of the Catholic Party surfaced, largely because of the political ramifications accompanying the abolition of replacement. How, it was argued, could equality of service be maintained when families with one son were compelled to give up the same number to the army as those with two, three, or more?¹¹² For many, the number of available working hands was essential to a household's survival. Replacement had to stay in order to redress this imbalance. Schollaert, however, was keen to make this project one of personal service, which by its very nature would not permit replacement to occur. Indeed, he even wanted to avoid an annual quota for the contingent, hoping instead to exponentially feed off the fluctuations in the country's demographics. This was deemed unconstitutional and was blocked, despite the obvious need to bring the army up to strength.

Projections for the 1910 contingent demonstrated that, despite having nominally 65,000 men of military age eligible, only 27,000 of these were eldest sons and liable to be called up under the new law. With exemption rates predicted to climb, the total number of men expected for incorporation was only 15,700, which was not significantly higher than it had been under the ballot system.¹¹³ As it turned out, the 1910 class produced 17,476 recruits.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, enough support across the political divide was garnered to carry the Bill safely through the Chamber of Representatives and the Senate. Famously, Leopold II signed the law introducing conscription, in the form of one-son per family, on his deathbed in December 1909. It was his last official ratification and was somewhat fitting that it should have been this particular piece of legislation about which he felt so strongly but had been unable to effect significant change. Schollaert was hailed as a courageous nationalist who had stuck to his convictions, triumphed against adversity, and delivered personal service.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Ibid., p. 357.

¹¹³ AER S.2509-365, Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, Note on the 1909 Recruiting System [date unknown, probably 1909].

¹¹⁴ De Vos, *Het Effectief*, p. 381.

¹¹⁵ AER S.2509-365, Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, Telegrams to Schollaert from NCO Veterans Society of Namur, 15 November 1909; the Community of Léau, 25 November 1909; NCO Veterans Society and Brothers in Arms of Gembloux, 19 November 1909;

Reaction from within the party itself was not as sympathetic and was still influenced by the fear that most of their electoral base would not back the decision. A few weeks prior to its ratification, the National Catholic League for the Reduction of Military Charges and the Extension of Volunteerism made a plea to all Catholics to join together to fight this evil, which they claimed was not only unjust but also unconstitutional. This association, with a membership of more than 12,000, believed that it would only increase costs as well as personal charges. Members argued that forcing the eldest son of each family to shoulder the heaviest of burdens was unfair, and questioned whether the ballot was not more equitable. 'For us, the only system sheltered from all criticism, the only one that conforms to the Catholic programme, is the abolition of any military constraint, that is to say "volunteerism". NIEMAND GEDWONGEN SOLDAAT' (no one forced to soldier).¹¹⁶ For a third time in as many decades, a crisis of leadership erupted over the military question.

When King Albert I succeeded his uncle in December 1909, he was faced with the challenge of forming a government in his name that would not only be internally stable but with which he would also be able to work during trying times. As a military man and a Liberal sympathiser, it behoved him to retain Schollaert for his work in delivering conscription and overseeing Belgium's annexation of the Congo in 1908. Common ground was likewise found over the containment of socialism. For a time, this arrangement suited both men, but when the Premier began pushing for increased clerical influence in schooling, conflict ensued.¹¹⁷ With enemies within the party waiting in the wings, Schollaert's political demise in June 1911 was inevitable. Exposed, the 1909 Law of one-son per family came under severe scrutiny from all quarters, resulting in Hellebaut's fall from the Ministry of War in November 1912.

Although the conscriptionist lobby had hailed Hellebaut for his role in delivering personal service, some of his decisions had seriously compromised its implementation. Despite claims that the 1909 Law was supplying the army with enough men, having seen the annual contingent rise from 10,892 in 1904 to 19,083 in 1912, the situation described by serving

Veterans Society of Knocke, 21 November 1909; Veterans Society of Jemappes, 21 November 1909; Royal Veterans Society of 1870–1871 of Leuven, 21 November 1909.

¹¹⁶ *La Belgique Militaire*, 26 September 1909.

¹¹⁷ Wils, 'Le gouvernement catholique', pp. 37–38.

officers in garrisons around the country was completely different.¹¹⁸ Hellebaut had contented himself with limiting the army's peacetime strength to 42,800 men and fears that the wartime establishment would be severely depleted appeared to be justified. Projections for full-scale mobilisation revealed a large deficit to the tune of 44,000 men from what the 1901 Commission had proposed. It would see fortress artillery units, for example, reduced to a mere 500 to 600 men as opposed to the 1,060 nominally required.¹¹⁹ Notwithstanding the numerical issues, the qualitative aspect of military efficiency was questionable as well, following the decision to reduce the time spent under arms to a mere 15 months. Similarly, both the 1911 and 1912 grand manoeuvres were cancelled, depriving the army of the all-important experience of large formation training.¹²⁰

A heightened sense of urgency following the Agadir crisis and the ensuing press campaign run by *Le Soir* under the heading of 'Are We Ready?' ('*Sommes-nous Prêts?*') produced severe scrutiny of Hellebaut's policies and apparent apathy towards building upon his 1909 project.¹²¹ Even the conservative elements of the Government began to look towards general service as a result. From national hero to 'mediocre administrator' in the space of two years, the Minister of War soon became the conduit through which militaristic criticism flowed because of newly uncovered deficiencies in the armed forces. Had European tensions not been running as high as they were, and the awakening of Belgian militarism not occurred as a result of the perceived threat of imminent invasion, it is more than likely that Hellebaut would have been permitted to retain his post and allow the 1909 Law to mature. As it was, the army called for his head on grounds of incompetence, claiming that he had 'betrayed the hopes of the army entrusted to him'.¹²²

Hellebaut resigned from his post in November 1912 and was succeeded by Charles de Broqueville, who had taken over the Premiership from Schollaert 17 months earlier. Officers throughout the army were said to

¹¹⁸ AER S.2514-370, Schollaert-Helleputte Papers Report: The Military Question in 1914.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., Collon to Helleputte, 29 November 1911.

¹²⁰ *Belgique Militaire*, 15 June 1913.

¹²¹ *Le Soir*, 31 August, 1-3, 21 September 1911 and 29 November 1911; *Belgique Militaire*, 15 June 1913.

¹²² AER S.2514-370, Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, Collon to Helleputte, 29 November 1911.

have rejoiced at the news and expected the new Minister of War to guide the army and the nation through the next series of vital military reforms necessary to repair the damage caused by decades of neglect.¹²³ De Broqueville appeared amenable to the idea of universal conscription and had promised to work closely with the King to bring about adequate internal and external guarantees—albeit at the expense of being allowed to develop some Catholic social policies. He proposed to broaden conscription to general service with a view to recruiting 33,000 to 35,000 men annually, creating a force of 340,000 men by 1925. This would bring it more in line with its neighbours in terms of the proportion of its population under arms and would allow it to play a greater role in European affairs. The social policies, which included a clerical scholastic law, however, heralded the beginning of one final political battle before its implementation. This time, it revealed the geopolitical split that pitted Catholic Flanders against Liberal/Socialist Wallonia, which struck at the heart of Belgium's nation-building experiment.

The 1912 general election witnessed the revival of a Liberal–Socialist pact to overturn the Catholics' monopolisation of power by allowing candidates who supported unadulterated universal suffrage to stand unopposed. The Catholic majority after the 1910 election had dwindled to just six seats and offered the opposition an opportunity to break the dominance provided they did not split the vote. Nonetheless, the combative nature of the Socialists, coupled with the anticlericalism of the Liberal–Radicals, proved too worrying a prospect for older Liberals and rural dwellers.¹²⁴ Combined with a redefinition of electoral boundaries, which saw the Chamber of Representatives move from 166 to 186 seats, the Catholic majority increased to 18, prompting a fierce backlash from disenfranchised Walloon workers. The resulting troubles in Wallonia resulted in armed repression, with three deaths reported in Liège.¹²⁵

Historians have pointed to the elections of 2 June 1912 as a turning point in Belgium's regional relationship, hailing it the awakening of Wallonia.¹²⁶ On 18 and 19 June, the provincial councils of Liège and

¹²³ Ibid., Collon to Helleputte, 24 February 1912; Hellebaut, *Mémoires*, pp. 97–98 and 102–103.

¹²⁴ Musin, 'Le Parti ouvrier belge', p. 28.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ P. Destatte, *L'identité wallonne: essai sur l'affirmation politique de la Wallonie aux XIX et XXèmes siècles* (Institut Jules Destrée, Charleroi, 1997), pp. 68–86; Wils, 'Le gouvernement catholique', p. 38.

Hainaut (majority Liberal–Socialist) passed a motion to be recognised as autonomous Walloon provinces because of the perceived electoral imbalance that favoured Antwerp, North Brabant, Flanders, and Limburg. On 7 July, the Walloon Congress backed the separation of Wallonia from Flanders and set up a commission to examine the issue. This resulted in the publication of Jules Destrée's famous 'Letter to the King on the Separation of Wallonia and Flanders', in which he stated that 'there are no Belgians. I mean by this that Belgium is a political State, somewhat artificially constructed, but that it is not a nationality'.¹²⁷ *Wallingantism* had emerged in all of its anticlerical and militant forms. To some, it appeared unpatriotic and merely galvanised the resolve of Catholics with strong Flemish connections to fortify their positions as *Flamingant* representatives. With proposals for universal conscription looming, and with it an increased Flemish representation among the rank and file, the questions of regional recruitment and linguistically exclusive languages reemerged with unprecedented force.

This was potentially explosive, as both sides of the linguistic argument were calling for alterations to both army and society that endangered Belgium's precarious nation-building project. Although regional recruitment offered some military advantages, such as improved speed and efficiency of mobilisation, it had always been recognised as 'inadmissible' on national grounds.¹²⁸ It would, according to *La Meuse*, have marked the end of the nation as it had been known:

In effect, in a country where there is a veritable national unity, geographic unity, and moral unity, regional recruitment already presents certain difficulties, because there is a need for a sense of '*la grande patrie*' in the army, and regionalism makes the feeling of '*la petite patrie*', that is to say the province where each soldier has his familial roots, prevail. In Belgium, such a system would be even more dangerous: regional recruitment would see the creation of a Flemish army and a Walloon army; it would be a military separation of Northern and Southern provinces, before the administrative and political separation.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ J. Destrée and H. Meert, *Lettre au Roi sur la Séparation de la Wallonie et de la Flandre. Gevold door het antwoord: A Monsieur Destrée* (M. Wesissenbruch, Brussels, 1912), p. 3. Really interesting findings about the competing Flemish and Walloon movements in the early twentieth century came out of a recent conference. For more on this, see chapters in Destatte, Lanneau, and Meurant-Pailhe (eds.), *Jules Destrée. Le Lettre au roi, et au-delà 1912–2012*.

¹²⁸ *L'Indépendance Belge*, 11 February 1900.

¹²⁹ *La Meuse*, 5 January 1913.

The lengthier concentration time of assembling men from across the country at regimental depots was considered worthwhile if it prevented unwarranted divisions between the Walloon and Flemish provinces. Linguistically segregated regiments would have undermined the army's attempts at solidifying the unified national identity it purported to uphold.

From the moment that Belgium won its independence, the army was seen as the natural adhesive between the two communities. National recruitment, through which most regiments could expect to receive men from all corners of the country, was utilised as a tool for nation-building. Contact between recruits from various social and geographical backgrounds made active service, be it in the barracks or on annual manoeuvres at Beverloo and beyond, the perfect space in which to create, refine, and disseminate the Belgian ideal.¹³⁰ Promotion of civic virtues and social duties were important in order to counter these ethnocultural regional identities that predominated in the Low Countries.¹³¹ The Revolution had not been fought on nationalistic grounds and, as such, a period of gestation was required before the basis of a unified identity could be formed.¹³² Military service offered the simplest solution. The Italians thought along similar lines after unification, as they attempted to

¹³⁰ L. De Vos, 'De smeltkroes. De Belgische krijgsmacht als natievormende factor, 1830–1885', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, vol. 15, no. 3–4, (1984), pp. 421–460; 'Het Dagelijkse Leven van de Belgische Soldaat 1830–1848', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 24, no. 5 (1982), pp. 465–494 and no. 6, (1982), pp. 529–560; Dierckx and Hoegaerts, 'Exercising neutrality', pp. 32–33 and 36–38; Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, p. 188.

¹³¹ AER Rogier Papers, POS 2328-417, Note by the Recruitment Committee, 10 April 1850. See also M. Van Genderachter, 'How Useful is the Concept of Ethnolinguistic Nationalism? On Imagined Communities, the Ethnic-Civic Dichotomy and Banal Nationalism', in P. Broomans (et al.) (eds.), *The Beloved Mother tongue: Ethnolinguistic Nationalism in Small Nations: Inventories and Reflections* (Peeters, Leuven, Paris/Dudley, MA, 2008), pp. 1–13; M. Beyen and M. Van Genderachter, 'General Introduction: Writing the Mass into a Mass phenomenon' in M. Van Genderachter and M. Beyen (eds.), *Nationhood from Below, Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2012), pp. 7–8.

¹³² E. Witte, *La Construction de la Belgique 1827–1847* (Éditions Complexe, Brussels, 2005), pp. 42–43. For regional consciousness see, A. B. Murphy, *The Regional Dynamics of Language Differentiation in Belgium: A Study in Cultural-Political Geography* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988), p. 9; B. De Wever, 'The Case of the Dutch-Speaking Belgians in the Nineteenth Century', in P. Broomans (et al.) (eds.), *The Beloved Mother tongue: Ethnolinguistic Nationalism in Small Nations: Inventories and Reflections* (Peeters, Leuven, Paris/Dudley, MA, 2008), pp. 49–50.

counter both the North–South cultural and linguistic divide, as well as the peasantry’s engrained parochialism.¹³³ In contrast to other institutions, such as schooling or the Church, which possessed equal access to, and influence on, a large proportion of the population, the army was considered to be more suited to the misplaced perception that it sat above party politics.

Nevertheless, if the army was the road along which a national identity was to be forged, then language was to act as the vehicle. Belgium was broadly divided into two linguistic groupings arising from the country’s location at the crossroads of Germanic and Latin culture. Yet outside the political elites, whose chosen language was classical French, the linguistic profile of Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia was a patchwork of dialects and local patois. Although by no means as diverse as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the decision to operate under a single language of command was a logical step towards efficiency.¹³⁴ The use of French, in both the army and civil administration, reflected the vision of the Revolution’s leaders, who wished to establish the country on a world stage and to distance themselves from Dutch rule. Even though it may have been irksome for some, the army’s linguistic policy did not become a divisive issue until the awakening of a wider Flemish consciousness after the 1850s.

According to Richard Boijen, the early years were characterised by an air of acceptance from the Flemish population who saw the language laws of the army mirror those experienced in their everyday lives. A process of ‘Galicisation’ almost had them accept positions as second-rate citizens.¹³⁵ The Catholic Ministry of Pierre De Decker led one of the first public forays into the idea of an awakening Flemish sentiment in 1856 when it instituted the Flemish Commission, which furnished a series of damning reports on the state of the nation and the army. Alexander B. Murphy has argued that the report was not all that radical as it did not seek, or even acknowledge, separate geographical–linguistic regions, but rather promoted freedom of choice and bilingualism.¹³⁶ This is true to a degree but conveniently overlooks the proposed introduction

¹³³ Gooch, *Army, State and Society*, p. 10.

¹³⁴ For the Austro-Hungarian example, see G. E. Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph* (Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, IN, 1976), pp. 76–77; Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, pp. 5 and 99–102.

¹³⁵ Boijen, ‘Het Leger als Smeltkroes’, pp. 55–70.

¹³⁶ Murphy, *The Regional Dynamics*, p. 67.

of regional recruitment for the first time in the history of the country. This is not insignificant. It was a proposal that sought to completely alter the organisation of the army and, more fundamentally, the role it had been asked to play as an instrument of nation-building in what was officially recognised as a culturally, linguistically, and geographically fractured country.

This premise is supported by the likes of S. B. Clough in his study of Belgian nationalism; he argued that Flemish propaganda, between 1830 and 1870, although small in scale, took on the appearance of a large nationalist movement with flags, songs, and even a national anthem. The emergence of the symbolic Flemish Lion is indicative of this. Even the first Netherlandish Language and Literacy Congress held in Ghent in 1849, the same year as the first Pan-Slav Congress in Prague, is suggestive of the progress that the concept of ethnolinguistic nationalism was making in Belgium as part of a wider European movement.¹³⁷ As such, there is evidence to indicate that the propositions made had a wider geopolitical agenda; both forged links between the Catholic Party and the subsequent struggle for Flemish linguistic recognition, as well as the first public admission of the ascendancy of regionalism over nationalism in the quest for identity within Belgium.

When grievances were expressed, they were not necessarily directed towards Wallonia as one might be tempted to suggest, but in fact against the French-speaking bourgeoisie of Flanders, who themselves were seen as the oppressors.¹³⁸ Only in the early twentieth century, when these distinct Flemish and Walloon movements confronted each other, was the fabric of the nation brought into serious doubt. In 1856, regional recruitment had been dismissed on two counts. First, Wellington had won the Battle of Waterloo with an army composed of four languages, therefore nullifying the arguments that multilingual armies were inherently inefficient. Second, it would have undermined attempts at forging a unified nation.

With the Liberals regaining power in 1857 under Charles Rogier, the Flemish question was almost entirely swept aside. In 1913, similar logic was applied in the national interest. Even though both regional recruitment and linguistic parity were considered ahead of the 1913 Law introducing conscription, Albert I and his Catholic Premier, Charles de

¹³⁷ Clough, *Flemish Movement*, pp. 74–78; Van Ginderachter, ‘Ethnolinguistic Nationalism’, pp. 1–13; De Wever, ‘Dutch-Speaking Belgians’, p. 55.

¹³⁸ Clough, *Flemish Movement*, p. 91.

Broqueville, worked hard behind the political scenes to muster enough cross-party support to keep these pillars of the nation-building project intact. The King recognised that everything in Destrée's letter was true—the opposition of anticlerical Wallonia with Catholic Flanders, the danger posed to Wallonia by the Flemish movement, the language issues that threatened the last bastion of French culture in Flanders, the University of Ghent—but he did feel that there were more dangers in this separation than in the current situation. The army was to remain a national institution and reject linguistic parity within it. In return, a string of social reforms was instituted and promises of future constitutional amendments were made to appease both sides and the growing Left.¹³⁹

The passage for universal conscription was cleared, though it left the question of Belgian identity somewhat disturbed in its wake. Although opposed by certain sections of the Catholic Party, de Broqueville managed to guide the Bill through the Chamber of Representatives on 28 May 1913 by 103 votes to 62, and three weeks later through the Senate by 68 votes to 27. The mollifications to respective political and regional groups were short-term fixes to be sure. Nonetheless, a national institution had been maintained and now had access to an even wider swathe of the country's youth. Linguistic parity in the army would take a world conflagration and further strike action to come to fruition, but the authorities had recognised that all was not well. They trusted in the idea that most of the population were Belgian first and Walloons and Flemings second. Much like Schollaert in 1909, the new Premier was hailed as a national hero for remaining strong in the face of adversity. Not only had he delivered the long-awaited introduction of personal, obligatory, and general service, but he had also done so without further reductions to the time spent under arms.¹⁴⁰ More significantly, he had begun to prepare Belgium for its sternest test to date as a nation without conceding too much to its nascent separatist movements.

Unquestionably, the recruitment of the rank and file was a traumatic experience for Belgium throughout its long nineteenth century. Army and society clashed repeatedly over the injustices of the ballot system, which appeared outdated and unnecessary in a perpetually neutral state. Faculty

¹³⁹ Wils, 'Le gouvernement catholique', pp. 42–43. For more on how the Flemish movement came to be linked with a popular Catholic working-class movement, see Wils, *Histoire des nations belges*, pp. 185–201.

¹⁴⁰ *Belgique Militaire*, 25 May 1913.

for replacement and substitution merely exacerbated social tensions and laid the foundations for a battle *royale* between the civilian and military spheres. Catholics and Liberals alike jostled for limited votes and, in doing so, pandered to the antimilitaristic urban bourgeoisie who were desperate to keep their sons out of the armed forces. Among the rural population and the disenfranchised city workers, antimilitarism was even more deeply engrained as a result of disproportionately enduring the 'blood tax' in their stead. Military increases were anathema and became the rallying call for the Catholic Party, whose obstruction of universal conscription in the defence of clerical society came to dominate the civil-military debate. Thus, it was left to the Liberals to plough a lonely furrow in the military question and pay the price in votes from the mid-1880s onwards. Only the coming of Socialism and a potential European war brought about significant change around the turn of the century. The process of militarisation of Belgium's bourgeoisie increased apace but took until the eve of the First World War to truly develop into acceptance of the army as an institution and a latent patriotism. This shows the degree to which the army struggled in its role as the 'school of the nation' in inculcating a unified sense of national identity. Indeed, by the twentieth century, the nation-building project of the 1830s was under threat from strong currents of Flemish and Walloon regionalism. These, too, became embroiled in the military debate as more progressive Catholic governments reluctantly delivered partial and general conscription following a failed last-ditch attempt at voluntary recruitment. Ultimately, social and military reforms were left to feel the after effects of aggressive politicking as the country was plunged into war in 1914. The unresolved linguistic issue would rear its head again before the Armistice, but not before the delays in introducing universal conscription were laid bare by the German invasion. Although Belgium's small army fought with pride, it did so with an insufficient number of soldiers to make a significant difference.

The Auxiliary Forces

Despite the regular army assuming primacy in the role of defending Belgian integrity from Dutch aggression during the 1830s, it was the nascent State's citizen militias that had taken the initiative during the September Revolution and on whose basis the armed forces were nominally established. Article 122 of the Constitution provided for the continued existence of a Civic Guard, whereas the army required parliamentary consent, albeit a formality, to raise its annual levies. Inspired and partially borne out of the French National Guard and Dutch *Schutterij* as a counterweight to anarchy and despotism, this amateur force formed a recognisable backbone to national security and internal law and order.¹ Nevertheless, its popularity as an institution proved more theoretical than practical. Much like the army, the Civic Guard conscripted all able-bodied men, with a few exemptions, between the ages of 21 and 50—latterly those 21 and 40—with the financial means to equip themselves, establishing what Frans Van Kalken referred to as an 'instrument of class'.² That being said, the urban bourgeoisie's militaristic sensibilities could no more be inspired by the prospect of part-time soldiering than they could by the ballot. Fulfilling a Rousseauian social contract only appealed

¹ Jacobs, 'Les Emblèmes de la Garde Civique 1830–1914', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 19, no. 8 (1972), p. 695; J. Verschaeren, 'De Burgerwacht te Sint-Niklaas-Waas: Een historisch onderzoek naar het wezen van een grondwettelijke instelling in de 19e eeuw', *Revue Belge d'Histoire Militaire*, vol. 19, no. 7 (1972), p. 595.

² F. Van Kalken, 'Ce que fut la Garde civique belge', *Revue Internationale d'histoire Militaire*, no. 20 (1959), p. 550.

during times of crisis, outside of which, the effectiveness of the Civic Guard waned with the current of antimilitarism so prevalent among Belgium's middle classes.³

This decline in enthusiasm and participation gradually translated into unpreparedness for their dual role as an aid to the civil power and as a support to the regular army. In maintaining its largely bourgeois composition, the Civic Guard was nominally well poised to deal with the proletarian threat of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Yet, its political orientation towards Liberalism, which was to be expected from a predominantly urban force, made it more prone to support the socialist movement against the Catholic Government after 1884. This resulted in *les bleus*—the infantry formations of the Civic Guard—and *les vertes*—the mounted and artillery volunteer units known as the *Corps Spéciaux*—being considered increasingly unreliable. The Constitution, which protected the few remaining aspects of the forces' revolutionary essence, obstructed necessary reform and prevented the Civic Guard from acting as an effective support for both the State and the army. Consequently, its presence diminished with time as local authorities turned increasingly to the regular army and the Gendarmerie—itself an institution reconstituted from the Dutch *Maréchaussées*—to provide unconditional support in restoring order.⁴ When faced with the prospect of an external threat, the Civic Guard was perceived as being even less effective, despite repeated attempts to militarise it. Army reformers, intent on emulating the Prussian system, sought to create a reserve force but were continually thwarted by constitutional safeguards, resulting in but minor alterations. The 1897 Law might have briefly stoked the smouldering embers of bourgeois militarism, but it did little in the way of establishing a suitable reserve for the army. Ultimately, the Civic Guard entered the twentieth century as a force that held neither the confidence of the State nor the military authorities. Once the very manifestation of a citizen army, the main body of Belgium's auxiliary forces found itself increasingly

³ It has been argued that the very existence of the French National Guard expressed a voluntary subordination to the law and, as such, a general intent to engage with the notion of a social contract; see L. Girard, *La Garde Nationale 1814–1871* (Librairie Plon, Paris), p. 8.

⁴ KLM (ed.), *Histoire de la Gendarmerie* (Ghesquière and Partners, Brussels, 1979), p. 263.

marginalised, becoming recognisable only for its distinctive hats and its reputation for military ineffectiveness.

In its earliest incarnation, the capital's bourgeoisie took measures to arm itself to protect individual and property rights during the 1830 Revolution. By the time of its formal recognition, the 864 volunteers constituted the only recognisable armed force in the city prepared to retain order.⁵ Similar units were formed across the country. Their role in securing independence was acknowledged by the Provisional Government who formalised the existence of the *Garde Urbaine Bruxelloise* on 30 September 1830 and the remaining corps into the Civic Guard on 26 October. It was enshrined in law on 31 December and, in so doing, passed from the realms of a spontaneous expression of civil will to an organised body under State jurisdiction. Devolved organisation by municipality and recruitment by commune did little to reassert the spirit of the Revolution. By 1848, the decentralisation process had all but eliminated the Civic Guard's presence outside of the country's urban centres. Only towns of more than 3,000 inhabitants and those dominated by fortifications were to organise an active Civic Guard; although even here, enthusiasm was negligible.⁶ Belgium's experiment with a people's army was extremely short-lived.

With the possible exception of the *Corps Spéciaux*, which saw wealthy volunteers with a martial spirit form independent mounted and artillery units, the Civic Guard, as an institution, relinquished an even greater proportion of its original essence with the introduction of conscription after 1848. Despite solidifying its bourgeois composition through an obligation to furnish one's own uniform for approximately F60, its increasingly military organisation detracted from its appeal. Divided initially into three bands comprised of unmarried men without children aged 21 to 30, unmarried men without children aged 31 to 50, and, finally, the rest, escaping service from the regulars through replacement or substitution appeared to offer little reward. Certainly, training was less frequent, though nonetheless onerous—reduced from 12 to 8 days annually in 1853—and the unsanitary barracks were entirely avoided. Nevertheless, the fact that both the civil and military authorities possessed the power to

⁵ J. Verschaeren, 'De Burgerwacht te Sint-Niklaas-Waas', *Revue Belge d'Histoire Militaire*, vol. 19, no. 8 (1972), p. 672.

⁶ É. Wanty, *Le Milieu Militaire Belge de 1831 à 1914* (Palais des Académies, Brussels, 1957), pp. 163–164.

call men out to serve anywhere in the country gave the impression of little differentiation between auxiliary service and regular furlough.⁷

The Civic Guard's utility was increasingly questioned during the 1830s as both internal and external threats subsided. The burden of militarisation, coupled with severe lack of funds for facilities and equipment, did little to reignite a desire for service among its members.⁸ It was briefly revived in spectacular fashion as a result of its performance during the troubles of 1848 but, once again, waned with the passing of the immediate danger. The 1853 revision of the 1848 Law dictated that only cities and agglomerated communes with a population of more than 10,000, or towns dominated by a fortress, could retain an active Civic Guard. Previously, the threshold had been as low as 3,000 inhabitants. This resulted in a reduction in the number of units and the overall establishment.

In 1833 the Civic Guard counted 257 legions—a term denoting a force of approximately 1,600 guards—amounting to 590,907 men across all three bands, with 89,089 in the active first band.⁹ By 1848 the force was reduced to 32 recognisable legions who received colours for services rendered in protecting Belgium from the revolutionary threat sweeping Europe. From here, further reductions resulted in just 20 legions in 1860; 21 in 1875; and 24 in 1893.¹⁰ In numbers, this saw just 29,274 active Civic Guards in 1860, translating to 0.6% of the population, rising minimally to 43,311 in 1893, equivalent to 0.7%. Its nonactive establishment was far more imposing, numbering some 200,400 men in 1860, although it existed principally on paper and was comparatively small to its 1830 equivalent.¹¹

⁷ Verschieren, 'De Burgerwacht te Sint-Niklaas-Waas', vol. 19, no. 8 (1972), p. 678.

⁸ P.P.R., 26 April 1834.

⁹ A.M.B. 1833, pp. 1–2. These were divided across the country as follows: Antwerp (48,533 men in 20 legions), Brabant (82,166 men in 27 legions), East Flanders (108,206 men in 38 legions), West Flanders (82,663 men in 40 legions), Hainaut (89,834 men in 35 legions), Namur (31,542 men in 16 legions), Liège (53,771 men in 25 legions), Limburg (49,793 men in 24 legions), and Luxembourg (44,399 men in 32 legions).

¹⁰ E. A. Jacobs, 'Emblèmes', vol. 19, no. 8 p. 709; Belgium, Ministry of Interior, *Statistique Générale de la Belgique. Exposé de la Situation du Royaume (Période Décennale de 1851 à 1860)*, Tome II, pp. 504–505; Belgium, Ministry of Interior, *Statistique Générale de la Belgique: Exposé de la Situation du Royaume de 1861 à 1875*, Tome I, p. 369; AER POS.2515-372, Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, Tabular recapitulation of Civic Guard organisation in annex of Chamber of Representatives debate, 24 March 1893.

¹¹ *Exposé 1860*, Tome II, p. 506.

The 1897 Law altered the organisation of the Civic Guard further, creating just two active bands, comprised of men aged 21 to 32 and 33 to 40, respectively. The aim was to reduce the military burden on society by releasing those who were too old to be of military value while increasing its military proficiency. Effectiveness, it was hoped, would offset the loss in numbers. Training was increased in the first band to 30, two-hour training exercises for the first year of service, and 10 such exercises for those in the second band who had not previously received any instruction. A proficiency test was required and, if passed, required guards to attend just 10 exercises per year in the first band and three in the second. Even the uniform, which had undergone a series of minor alterations in the preceding decades to recapture the bourgeois spirit, was remilitarised with the mandatory addition of the *capote* and *havre-sac*.¹² For the Government, which had been toying with the idea of introducing voluntary enlistment in the regular forces, a more militarily effective Civic Guard provided a further buffer against the introduction of personal service.

Supporting the Civic Guard in its internal policing role was the *Gendarmerie*. Its organisation and recruitment was, naturally, even more militarised and regulated than its auxiliary counterpart, ensuring a much more stable existence and increasingly prominent role. In October 1830, the Dutch Government called on all men of the *Maréchaussée* to return to the Netherlands to resume service against the Belgian revolutionaries. Only a minority did so. Significantly, 18 officers chose to remain in Belgium and resume service under the Provisional Government.¹³ Among them was the iconic figure of Lieutenant Prudent-Joseph Deladière, whose ride at the head of 140 horsemen from Mons to Brussels on 1 October in support of the Revolution, inspired this realignment of allegiance.¹⁴ After providing useful service to the 3rd Heavy Cavalry Brigade in 1831 and 1832, the military squadrons were disbanded and the force assumed its dual peacetime role of maintaining internal law and order as well as acting as military provosts.

Administratively, the *Gendarmerie* was divided into three territorial divisions (subsequently four and then five groups in 1908 and 1913,

¹² *Statistique Générale de la Belgique: Exposé de la Situation du Royaume de 1876 à 1900 Rédigé sous la Direction de la Commission Centrale de Statistique, Tome I*, p. 398.

¹³ KLM (ed.), *Gendarmerie*, p. 215.

¹⁴ B. Dupuis and J. Balsaen, *Souvenirs d'un corps d'élite. La Gendarmerie Belge* (La Renaissance du Livre, Tournai, 2001), p. 19.

respectively) of three companies each. The 1st Division covered the regions of Brabant, Hainaut, and Namur, the 2nd Division oversaw Antwerp and the two Flanders, and the 3rd Division covered Liège, Limburg, and Luxembourg. These were then broken down into a further 27 Lieutenancies—usually the large cities—and then into 191 Brigades, establishing a wide geographical distribution of State forces across the country. By 1875 this had been increased to 211 Brigades and by the turn of the century to a comprehensive 329. In 1860, it boasted an establishment of 40 officers and 1,327 men (909 mounted and 418 on foot).¹⁵ However, this remained 15% below establishment and required a series of Royal Decrees to relax the height requirements, raise pay and pensions, as well as introduce bounties for voluntary detachments from the regulars, before significant improvements in recruitment occurred.¹⁶ By 1875 this had risen to 46 officers and 1,572 men (1,086 mounted and 486 on foot) and by 1900 there were 65 officers and 2,843 men under arms (1,727 mounted and 1,116 on foot).¹⁷ This increase of 214% in under half a century reflected its value as an aid to the civil power during the turbulent years that accompanied the rise of socialist agitation in many urban centres. Axel Thixhon has equally uncovered a direct correlation between the size of the force and the number of men tried by the courts over the same period.¹⁸ By the outbreak of war, it totalled 3,696 men.¹⁹

Recruitment for the Gendarmerie was very different from the Civic Guard and was based on the French and Dutch systems out of which it had spawned. Engagements were for six years, reduced to four or two for those who had completed a Regular engagement. Ideally, only ex-servicemen with five years of experience, who had exemplary conduct records, were to be admitted; this was in addition to the general criteria of being unmarried, under 40 years of age, literate, and above the height threshold of 170 centimetres (5'7") for foot soldiers and 173 centimetres (5'8") for mounted troops. In times of poor recruitment, these parameters were bent to a certain degree, and civilians were even enrolled

¹⁵ *Exposé 1860, Tome II*, pp. 359–361.

¹⁶ A. Thixhon, 'L'essor de la gendarmerie belge et la mesure de la criminalité (1841–1885)', in J.-N. Luc (ed.), *Gendarmerie, État et Société au XIXe Siècle. Actes du Colloque Organisé les 10 et 11 Mars 2000 par le Centre de Recherches en Histoire du XIXe Siècle* (Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris, 2002), p. 462.

¹⁷ *Exposé 1875, Tome I*, pp. 436–442; *Exposé 1900, Tome I*, p. 478.

¹⁸ Thixhon, 'L'essor de la gendarmerie belge', p. 462.

¹⁹ KLM (ed.), *Gendarmerie*, p. 274.

providing they met most of them. For example, between 1849 and 1852, out of 373 men recruited into the Gendarmerie, 82 had been NCOs in the regular army, 202 had been private soldiers, and 89 had had no previous military experience.²⁰ The proportion of NCOs was indicative of the nature and role of the force, which although less repressive than its Napoleonic incarnation, was still required to remain detached from the civilian population in the performance of its duties.²¹ Nevertheless, a training depot was established in Brussels in 1869 to improve the quality of the Gendarmerie by providing recruits with a full military and judicial education. It was hoped, particularly by the landowning proponents in the Senate, that an increased presence of highly trained men, mainly in the countryside, would help professionalise the less well-established communal police forces in their fight against crime.²²

From its inception, the bourgeois character of the Civic Guard was never in doubt. The obligation to furnish their own uniforms, coupled with a need to protect their stake in the establishment, provided both a physical and abstract restriction to the more undesirable elements of society from taking part. Complete, or even sufficiently informative, roll books for the Civic Guard are rare and make a consistent temporal and geographical analysis of its social composition difficult to accurately determine. Nevertheless, a general impression can still be obtained from the isolated study of several individual units over the course of the nineteenth century. Richard Coenen's study of 367 Antwerp guards in 1838, for example, underscored the perception of the Civic Guard as a bourgeois institution, claiming that 75.4% belonged to some form of trade or industry.²³ By the end of the century, this appears to have altered little in the country's urban centres. A sample of 1,004 guards from Brussels in 1897 suggests that 69.7% belonged to a similar demographic of shopkeepers, clerks, mechanics,

²⁰ Ibid., p. 269. Actually, the figure of 82 NCOs was split between the designations of 16 'NCOs' and 66 'corporals and *brigadiers*'.

²¹ For the Gendarmerie's Napoleonic organisation and character, see M. Broers, *Napoleon's Other War: Bandits, Rebels and Their Pursuers in the Age of Revolutions* (Peter Lang Ltd., Witney, 2010), pp. 86–90.

²² Tixhon, 'L'essor de la gendarmerie belge', pp. 464–465.

²³ R. Coenen, 'De Politieke en Sociale Gebondenheid van de Antwerpse Burgerwacht, 1830–1914', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1971), p. 322.

and artisans.²⁴ In contrast, however, an examination of an active rural unit in West Flanders in 1848 revealed an altogether different, though not entirely unsurprising, social composition. Of the 140 listed occupations, 99 were farmers which, with the addition of a single shepherd, accounted for 71.4% of the establishment, compared to just 26.4% employed in trade or industry.²⁵ Whereas this clearly reflects the occupational complexion of the urban–rural divide, it equally demonstrates the popularity and extension of the force in response to the upheaval of 1848. It also related a distinctive bourgeois element that was not seen in any great numbers in the regular army until the eve of the First World War.²⁶ However, once the immediate danger had passed and service was again considered burdensome, many of these units were disbanded under the revised Law of 1853.

By the time that the 1867 Recruiting Commission discussed the proposition of recasting the Civic Guard into a reserve force, like the Prussian *Landwehr*, urban dominance had been reestablished. In seeking to raise 30,000 men for this task, the Commission suggested that there were approximately 150,000 untapped *campagnards* who were eligible for service, except for the law restricting active Civic Guard units to the major towns and cities.²⁷ Having been appointed as Inspector-General of the Civic Guard, Lieutenant-General Renard extolled the virtues of the nation-in-arms, wishing to see the force encompass all classes for the purposes of national defence. By contrast, the likes of Chazal and Brialmont questioned the utility that such a poorly organised, equipped, and trained force could bring. Due to its very nature, the Civic Guard possessed a better class of recruit than the rank and file, but it would clearly be incomparable with the *Landwehr* whose members had already benefitted from a thorough military education during their

²⁴ AER POS.2515-372, Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, Enrolment lists of the Brussels Civic Guard, 1897. Data computed from 1004 database entries. It must be noted that not all listed names had the same information attached, meaning that calculations were often derived from a smaller sample.

²⁵ Rijksarchief Kortrijk (RAK) 301/13-1364, Gemeentearchief Deerlijk, Nominative roles of men composing the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd companies of the Deerlijk Civic Guards taken on 21 July 1848—data computed from 143 database entries. Similarly, it must be noted that not all listed names had the same information attached, meaning that calculations were often derived from a smaller sample.

²⁶ See Chap. 4.

²⁷ Comm 1867, 15th Meeting, 10 April 1867.

time with the regulars.²⁸ As such, the matter was dropped, and the urban-bourgeois dominance retained.

With the passing of time, however, a simmering discontent began to be expressed regarding the obvious injustice of the system. A proposed article in the 1897 Law, allowing the Government to decide which rural areas to agglomerate for the purposes of raising a Civic Guard battalion, appeared absurdly arbitrary. Residents of Antwerp, for example, became agitated when it was discovered that the city dwellers would be compelled to serve in the force while the inhabitants of the neighbouring suburbs of Berchem and Borgerhout were likely to escape the charge. This was not a new phenomenon. It became known that politicians seeking election had, for some time, been garnering votes on the basis of promises to use their influence in Parliament to avoid the extension of the Civic Guard into their localities.²⁹ It very much reflected the sentiment expressed in *La Belgique Militaire* in 1871, which stated that the respectable elements of society would not wish to fight at the critical hour if other social groups—particularly the working classes—were not equally compelled to do their bit. Yet they, along with the authorities, would be similarly disinclined to constitute it on an egalitarian basis for fear of exposing it to the International and, in so doing, creating an instrument of revolution.³⁰ This was just one of the many dichotomies of the Civic Guard that persisted beyond the 1897 reform.

As part of an attempt to remilitarise the force, the age parameters of the two active bands were altered and the upper age limit was reduced from 50 to 40. Coenen's analysis of the Antwerp Civic Guard in 1838 revealed that 56.4% of men were under the age of 35, with the majority falling between 30 and 35.³¹ By contrast, the Deerlijk companies only counted 24.5% of their recruits between the same ages. Their proportion of younger men was higher by 12%. Only one man was above the age of 40.³² This was partially a result of its occupational composition, with many more labourers (farmers in Deerlijk's case) among its ranks, whose average age was between one and two years lower than men in trade or industry.

²⁸ Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, p. 165.

²⁹ *L'Opinion*, 3–4 January 1897.

³⁰ *La Belgique Militaire*, 19 November 1871.

³¹ Coenen, 'Politiek', p. 322.

³² RAK, 303/13-1364, Deerlijk database.

Table 5.1 Occupational Profile of the Brussels Civic Guard Before and After the 1897 Law, in Percentage Terms

		<i>Age (years)</i>	<i>Professions</i>	<i>Shopmen/ clerks</i>	<i>Mechanics</i>	<i>Artisans</i>	<i>Labourers</i>
Pre-1897	1st Band	28.2	19.1	34.4	7.3	21.4	17.8
	2nd Band	42.9	13.0	42.2	9.8	22.2	12.8
	Overall	36.5	15.5	39.2	8.8	21.9	14.8
Post-1897	1st Band	27.1	18.5	33.6	8.2	21.2	18.5
	2nd Band	36.6	15.9	42.4	7.6	18.2	15.9
	Overall	31.3	17.3	37.5	7.9	19.9	17.3

Source: AER, POS.2515-372, Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, Brussels database. These occupational groupings are taken from Spiers, *Victorian Army*, p. 130.

An examination of the Brussels Civic Guard both before and after the introduction of the 1897 Law bears out this correlation even further. As shown in Table 5.1, the overall average age of an urban unit dominated by typically bourgeois occupations was as high as 36.5 years before the reform and 31.3 after it. Unsurprisingly, it was the second band whose average age fell dramatically by six years. This was largely a result of the advanced ages associated with the trading classes who accounted for 41.5% of all departures. The effect on the social composition was only minor, with the professional and labouring classes slightly increasing their respective positions within it, but ultimately, the status quo was maintained—albeit in a more physically able form.

If the labouring classes were comparatively absent in the regular units of the Civic Guard, then their presence in the *Corps Spéciaux* was effectively nonexistent. These mounted and artillery units, generally restricted to populous cities or areas of strategic importance, formed the pinnacle of bourgeois militarism through recourse to voluntary enlistment. In his study of the Liège units, Francis Balace noted a distinct Liberal-bourgeoisie presence in the *Chasseurs à Pied* and an even more upper class composition in the artillery and cavalry corps.³³ The cost of up to £100 more for equipment and eccentric uniforms inspired by the Second Empire

³³ F. Balace, 'Soldats ou civils? La Garde Civique liègeoise en août 1914', *Revue Internationale d'Histoire Militaire*, vol. 29 (1970), p. 817. Prominent Liberal supporters, such as the politician Paul Van Hoegarden and his successor Major E. Norifalisse, the Director-General of the Liègois Tramways, commanded the *Chasseurs à Pied*.

safeguarded their exclusivity.³⁴ Factory workers earned approximately £2 a day and were hopelessly priced out of the market.³⁵

This is not to say that men of lower standing were completely absent from these corps, but their zeal and willingness to endure the costly burdens outside periods of crisis certainly reduced their numbers. Indeed, their social exclusivity was hardly ever in doubt under ordinary circumstances, especially given the presence of the nation's peerage in these formations. Among others, Count Frédéric de Mérode was killed in November 1830 while serving with the *Chasseurs à Pied de Bruxelles*, whilst the Marquis de Chasteleer formed and led what became the first squadron of the *Chasseurs Éclaireurs* in February 1831. Even by 1867, the aristocracy's influence remained undiminished as Count Gaston d'Aerschot established the first of two companies of the *Chasseurs Belges Volontaires*.³⁶ In the absence of enrolment lists, a detailed breakdown of their social composition is impossible. Nevertheless, it would seem plausible to suggest that a combination of their voluntary status, higher upkeep costs, and aristocratic participation produced an even greater aspiring middle class stranglehold within these units than in the ordinary formations.

Often described as amateurs and belittled for displaying a misplaced pomposity and self-importance, these units ought to have been more readily commended for their solitary expression of a volunteering military tradition in Belgium.³⁷ Those who recognised this act often favourably compared them to the British Rifle Volunteers with whom they, and members of the Civic Guard in general, would come into contact on a number of occasions during the 1860s and 1870s. Annual shooting competitions, held alternately on Wimbledon Common and in Brussels, brought together enthusiasts from across the Channel. A tinge of international

³⁴ E. Witte, 'The Formation of a Centre in Belgium: The Role of Brussels in the Formative Stage of the Belgian State (1830–40)', *European History Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1989), p. 451; Van Kalken, 'Ce que fut', p. 557; MRA 288/97, Fonds Burgerwacht, Director General Ministry of the Interior to Superior Commander of the Garde Civique of Ghent, 25 November 1897.

³⁵ R. Darquenne, *Les Warocqué et La Garde Civique* (Musée Royal de Mariemont, Morlanwelz, 1987), pp. 26–27.

³⁶ For more on the formation of individual *Corps Spéciaux* and other units of Brussels, see *Histoire de la Garde Civique de Bruxelles* (Musée Royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire Militaire, Brussels, 1979).

³⁷ *Le Belgique Militaire*, 30 April 1871.

flavouring was added when, on occasion, invitations were extended to the Dutch *Schutterij* and French National Guard. For some of the more eager members of the Civic Guard, encounters with the esteemed Rifle Volunteers were coveted affairs. Beyond the socialising aspect that clearly dominated these events, the cultivation of friendships and exchange of knowledge fed into a wider wish, among some, to express the virtues of bourgeois militarism.³⁸ Intelligent men, as Lieutenant Verstrate noted in 1866, formed—or could form—a useful military force; the difficulty was to engage them willingly for a protracted period of time.³⁹ Rather ironically, however, Ian Beckett has argued that, by 1862, the social composition of the British Rifle Volunteers had begun to change from ‘the original middle class ideal to a working class reality’—the very antithesis of Belgian popular imagination.⁴⁰

The Civic Guard’s officer corps represented the last vestige of the revolutionary spirit through the quinquennial election of its NCOs and officers up to the rank of captain inclusive—except for the sergeant-major who was nominated by the corps’ captain. The more senior ranks were appointed by the King upon being presented with a list of candidates nominated by the unit’s newly elected junior officers. This system, although to be applauded for its endeavour in adhering to both the Constitution and institutional heritage, proved more problematic through its abuses and inefficiency than it was worth. It furnished neither qualified nor apolitical men, which ultimately contributed, in part, to the force’s eventual demise.

In terms of its social composition, the senior administrative and staff roles were almost exclusively the preserve of the professional classes. Of the 28 officers to occupy the roles of Inspector General down to Chief of Staff of the Brussels Commander of the Civic Guard between 1831 and 1914, 12 were of a military background, nine were from the professions, six were merchants or civil servants, and one was classified as an agricultural

³⁸ E. A. Jacobs, ‘Garde Civique Belge et Riflemen Anglais’, *Revue belge d’histoire militaire*, vol. 17, no. 4 (1967), pp. 306–330.

³⁹ E. Verstrate, *De la Réorganisation de la Garde Civique et de son Adjonction à l’Armée de Campagne* (C. Muquardt, Brussels, 1866), p. 7.

⁴⁰ I.F.W. Beckett, *Riflemen Form: A Study of the Rifle Volunteer Movement 1859–1908* (The Ogilby Trusts, Aldershot, 1982), pp. 73–74. For more on the British Rifle Volunteer movement, see also I.F.W. Beckett, *The Amateur Military Tradition 1558–1945* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1991); H. Cunningham, *The Volunteer Force: A Social and Political History 1859–1908* (Archon Books, Hamden, CT, 1975).

labourer—although this individual was himself the son of an established Luxembourg landed family that was left destitute by the French Revolution.⁴¹ Similarly, of the 32 men to have commanded one of the three Brussels legions (subsequently two regiments) over the same period, two were soldiers, 14 were from the professions, and six were merchants.⁴² Finally, of the 40 men to have held the post of Commander of one of the Brussels *Corps Spéciaux*, a similar picture emerged: 13 were soldiers, 18 were from the professions, three were merchants, one was a plumber, two were artisans, and two were left unspecified.⁴³ Even at more junior levels, similar patterns emerged. The 1894 election of officers in the Luxembourg Civic Guard, for example, shows that, despite the dominance of agriculture in the region, almost equal numbers of professionals (34.6%) as farmers (38.5%) were nominated for captaincies. By contrast, the lower ranks of lieutenant and second-lieutenant saw the proportion of professionals fall markedly (11.5% and 9.6%, respectively).⁴⁴ Not only does this demonstrate a firm grip on the Civic Guard's leadership by the traditionally reliable classes of society but also, in the case of its most senior commands, there was a concerted effort to appoint men with military experience.

Unsurprisingly, this attempted professionalisation of the Civic Guard was already deeply ingrained in the Gendarmerie. Every Inspector General, Corps Commander, and Commandant of the 1st Division between 1830 and 1914 could boast a military or Gendarme background. Whereas the senior ranks in the Civic Guard were almost exclusively reserved as a final command in a military career (only two assumed another post afterwards), ten out of 36 senior officers in the Gendarmerie went on to reenter the regular army. Similarly, of the 33 captains-commandant and captains of the Brabant Company, only four came from civilian employment prior to

⁴¹ A database of 112 Civic Guard and 162 Gendarmerie entries was compiled from the biographical entries in L. Keunings, *Les forces de l'ordre à Bruxelles au XIXe siècle: Données biographiques* (Ville de Bruxelles, Brussels, 2007) pp. 107–168 and 186–246. This formed an officer database for both forces that will subsequently be referred to as 'Keunings Database'. It may be noted that in the event where a man's occupation was not listed but his father's was, the latter was used.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Archives d'État d'Arlon (AEA) 030/3-168—data computed from election rolls of 12 companies in the Province of Luxembourg. These were Athies, Attert, Aubange, Bellefontaine, Bonnert, Etalle, Messaney, Pelrunes, Rossignal, Saint-Vincent, Sélange, and Tintigny.

entering the Gendarmerie.⁴⁵ This homogeneity, experience, and professionalism allowed for the successful undertaking of its more strenuous tasks. It also provided local authorities with a guaranteed source of steel in times of social unrest, which was often found lacking in the Civic Guard.

The election of junior officers in the Civic Guard was seen as a perennial stumbling block to the development of military effectiveness. The social and political status accompanying a commission relegated martial spirit to a secondary importance. Although there were instances when candidates who nominally possessed the right credentials were elevated to prominent positions, the very nature of quinquennial elections made the composition of the officer corps fluid and, more significantly, open to regular abuse. As early as 1832, reports were sent back from the provinces to the Minister of War that demonstrated the inherent problem in entrusting uninformed men with a vote, particularly given how uncustomary it was in civilian life. Still only 2% of the adult male population were enfranchised after the electoral reforms of 1848.⁴⁶ Whereas the commune of Vielsam returned 'satisfactory results', the commander of Paliseul reported, 'the choices, without being good, are the least bad possible'. Durbuy, by contrast, elected 'ignorant and incapable officers'.⁴⁷ Over time, provisions were introduced to guard against incompetence, such as exam commissions with the power to dismiss both officers and NCOs who failed to meet the required standard. Nevertheless, the system remained fallible as only a minority of candidates were ever rejected and reports concerning the quality of command at all levels remained a cause for concern. Between 1861 and 1875, for example, 3,570 officer candidates and 4,259 NCO candidates were examined by the commission, of which only 75 and 72, respectively, were dismissed on grounds of incompetence.⁴⁸

Transgressions of an altogether worse nature were not uncommon. Reports of factions and election rigging abounded. *Le Courier de l'Escaut* revealed a case in 1848 in which senior officers managed to remove one of their rivals from the list of candidates to be submitted for the rank of

⁴⁵ Keunings Database.

⁴⁶ V. Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See from Gregory XVI to Pius IX (1831–1859) Catholic Revival, Society and Politics in 19th-Century Europe* (Institut Historique Belge de Rome, Brussels & Rome, 2001), p. 27.

⁴⁷ AEA 030/3-114, Tabular return of information regarding Luxembourg Civic Guard units sent to Governor of Luxembourg, 8 May 1832.

⁴⁸ *Exposé 1875, Tome I*, p. 368.

Lieutenant-Colonel, despite his obvious popularity among the men.⁴⁹ Likewise, *Le Progrès* claimed that malicious elements in Ypres had deliberately committed bureaucratic infractions to prevent an election from occurring because they feared a negative result.⁵⁰ These misdemeanours were not isolated events. Indeed, the Minister of the Interior, Gustave Rolin-Jaequemans, was so appalled by the extent of manipulation that he felt compelled to write a warning to the Governor of Brabant.⁵¹ Lists of candidates for senior ranks had been submitted with the intention of making one man stand out as the obvious choice for the nomination. This had been done by writing comments, such as ‘complacent’, ‘would refuse the rank’, or ‘is unsuited’, next to the names of alternatives, which in some cases, were no more than fictitious characters who did not even appear on the enrolment registers.⁵²

Despite the Ministry’s power to have contentious lists reformulated, bias remained ever-present and, if not conducted on the grounds of personality, was often susceptible to political agitation. *L’Écho du Parlement* wrote in 1874 that the Civic Guard had a political character and that it was decidedly Liberal.⁵³ This had been preceded in 1873 by a report on officer elections that stated: ‘On Sunday, the Civic Guard elections in Antwerp caused a lively agitation. *The victory belonged to the Liberals, because these elections were conducted on political grounds*’.⁵⁴ The infiltration—almost monopolisation—of the Civic Guard’s senior ranks was seen as an attempt to turn the force into a party instrument. *Le Courier de l’Escant* wrote: ‘Everywhere where they were able to exclude the Catholics from obtaining positions as officers they made sure to do so, irrespective of the

⁴⁹ *Le Courier de l’Escant*, 29 August 1848.

⁵⁰ *Le Progrès*, 23 April 1893.

⁵¹ Rolin-Jaequemans, Minister of the Interior from 1878 to 1884, left Belgium following the election defeat of 1886 and took up service as General Advisor to King Chulalongkorn of Siam in September 1892, reforming the country’s institutions and acting as a mediator during an 1893 crisis involving the French Empire. After returning to Belgium in 1901, he became a founding member of the Institute of International Law, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1904. *Biographie Nationale* (Académie Royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts), Tome 29, pp. 804–807.

⁵² MRA, Fonds Burgerwacht 289/174, Rolin-Jaequemans to Governor of Brabant, 21 June 1881.

⁵³ *L’Écho du Parlement*, 11 February 1874.

⁵⁴ *La Belgique Militaire*, 20 May 1883.

candidates' credentials or military capacities'.⁵⁵ This appears to have been the case across the country.

In Brussels, of the 23 legion and regimental commanders whose political leanings were recorded, 20 were Liberals, two were Catholics, and one was an Orangist serving immediately after the Revolution. A similar complexion was also found in the capital's *Corps Spéciaux* commanders, where 20 of the 25 known cases were also of a Liberal persuasion.⁵⁶ On the rare occasion when a Catholic candidate succeeded in overcoming the political hurdles, as in Tournai in 1878, there were calls to build on this minor victory to wrest back the momentum from the Liberals in other units as well as in the upcoming communal elections.⁵⁷ Given the typically Liberal leanings of the urban bourgeoisie and the 1853 Law restricting the establishment of Civic Guard units to cities with a population upwards of 10,000, this proved difficult to achieve. If the Catholics largely managed to restrain their political opponents' influence over the army after 1884, then the Liberals certainly achieved an equivalent stranglehold within the Civic Guard. The unintentional consequence was to intensify calls for the introduction of personal service in the army, as little faith could be laid in the dysfunctionality of the Civic Guard.

In 1872, the then Colonel Henri-Alexis Brialmont wrote a pamphlet entitled *Ce Que Vaut la Garde Civique*, questioning the utility and continued existence of the force. In his opinion:

The principal causes of weakness in the Civic Guard are: the election of officers by their subordinates; [...] the renewal of elections and nominations every five years; [...] the lack of exercises, the poor maintenance of armaments and the inefficiency of disciplinary measures, that imbues neither order, nor the respect of authority, nor strict and prompt obedience, without which an organised force does not exist.⁵⁸

The inflammatory remarks attacked not only the Constitutional guarantees protecting the election of officers but also questioned the latter's ability to adequately fulfil its task. The repercussions reverberated throughout the country, spurring many an indignant Civic Guardsman to pen ripostes

⁵⁵ *Le Courier de l'Escant*, 8 May 1878; see also Coenen, 'Politiek', pp. 336–338.

⁵⁶ Keunings Database.

⁵⁷ *Le Courier de l'Escant*, 10 May 1878.

⁵⁸ H. A. Brialmont, *Ce Que Vaut la Garde Civique: Étude sur la Situation Militaire du Pays* (A. N. Lebègue et Compie, Brussels, 1872), p. 27.

defending the institution, within which, as officers, they were proud to serve. 'They have unanimously decided to protest [...] and I agree with all the points in their piece', wrote the Major-General of the Ghent Civic Guard.⁵⁹ Although this indignation was to be expected, it could not mask the valid points raised in the pamphlet regarding the organisation of the Civic Guard, which, by extension, questioned its ability to meaningfully undertake either of its roles as an aid to the civil power or as a reserve force to the army.

The timing of the publication ought not to be forgotten in the analysis of its arguments. It formed part of the extensive literature in circulation following another resounding victory of the Prussian military system over what many had considered to be the best army in the world at the time.⁶⁰ Not surprisingly, European states began a sustained period of self-assessment surrounding their armed forces and sought to emulate, to various degrees, the all-conquering Prussian model. Belgium was no different. Brialmont's writings were among those calling for the militarisation of society and, more specifically, the introduction of personal service, which increased in prominence as the century ended.⁶¹ As previously alluded to, the Recruitment Commission of 1867 was established in the wake of the Austro-Prussian War to discuss many of the same principles. Deliberation concerning the Civic Guard centred on this very debate: to what extent should it act as an internal police force or, as was now the fashion, an equivalent to the Prussian *Landwehr*?

For those wishing to militarise the Civic Guard, the Constitution, guaranteeing its existence and elections, merely appeared archaic and a hindrance to the establishment of a viable role for the force in the modern world. Brialmont pointed out that its function as a counterweight to a standing army may have been important in an age when it was comprised

⁵⁹ MRA, Fonds Burgerwacht 289/140, Major-General of the Gent Civic Guard to Lieutenant-General Renard, Inspector General of the Civic Guard, 25 December 1872.

⁶⁰ Among the extensive literature of Prussian military successes in the mid- to late nineteenth century, see M. Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: the German invasion of France, 1870–71* (Hart-Davis, London, 1961); G. Wawro, *The Austro-Prussian War. Austria's War with Prussia and Italy in 1866* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996); G. Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War. The German Conquest of France in 1870–1871* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003); A. Bucholz, *Moltke and the German Wars, 1864–1871* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2001); D. Showalter, *The Wars of German Unification* (Hodder, London, 2004).

⁶¹ See De Muélenaere, 'Belgen zijt gij ten strijde gereed? Militarisering een neutral natie, 1890–1914' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Antwerp, 2016).

of mercenaries in the pay of a despotic monarch, but since it had, and would increasingly, become 'a reunion of honourable citizens, representing all classes of society, they no longer pose[d] any danger to the liberties that they helped conquer and swore to defend'.⁶² In so doing, he brought the very essence of the Civic Guard's existence into question, which again prompted swift retaliation. 'The violent attacks, of which our institution was the object, [...] have profoundly affected the officer corps of the citizen militia in Antwerp and will not leave indifferent any good patriot attached to the Constitution, the King, public liberties and our rights', was the reaction noted by Colonel David, who took great pride in the Civic Guard's legacy of preserving communal liberties.⁶³ Tradition and heritage dominated the rhetoric of defence. An 1895 letter received by the then Minister of the Interior, François Schollaert, read:

The Civic Guard has traditions as respectable as they are old that uphold communal autonomy, [...] subordinating the conditions of existence of the Civic Guard to the general and hierarchical rules of the army, is to collide with an irreducible opposition and run towards a certain defeat.⁶⁴

It exemplified the problem dividing the two schools of thought that, in their own ways, put forward valid arguments. On the one hand, recent developments in warfare dictated the necessity to militarise amateur forces. Contrarily, the Civic Guard's unique position in the fabric of the nation made it impossible.

The perseverance with the election process fundamentally denied the force the opportunity to become militarily effective. Not only did it elevate candidates to ranks for which they were entirely unsuited but also undermined the ability of officers to exert any authority during their tenure for fear of losing their position at the ballot-box every five years.⁶⁵ As an article in *La Belgique Militaire* noted, it demonstrated a clear lack of

⁶² Brialmont, *Que Vaut*, pp. 21–22.

⁶³ MRA 288/31, Fonds Burgerwacht, Colonel David of the Antwerp Civic Guard to Unknown, 20 December 1872; *La Belgique Militaire*, 20 May 1883.

⁶⁴ AER POS. 2515-372, Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, De Vigneron to Schollaert, 21 August 1895.

⁶⁵ Ibid., Transcript of Chamber of Representatives, Session of 24 March 1893, Anspach Project.

prestige and standing by the citizen officers among their citizen men.⁶⁶ Additionally, the disciplinary machinery was completely insufficient for the task. Officers often complained that their powers were so restricted as to be rendered effectively useless. As early as 1832, reports from Luxembourg illustrated the extent of the problem: 'Discipline is, to say the least, nil. The actions of the disciplinary councils cannot make themselves felt enough. Officers do not have enough power'.⁶⁷ Little had changed by the end of the century. An 1895 memorandum circulated by a group of senior officers explained how the system of reprimands was a dead letter as any extra duties went against the law which regulated the maximum amount of time that a guard could be called out for service.⁶⁸

Such a minimal amount of control had a disastrous effect on the rank and file. From the earliest days, when the desire to participate in the forging of a nation made service more appealing, military order remained elusive. The Governor of Luxembourg wrote of this to the Minister of the Interior, and future Premier, Barthélemy de Theux de Meylandt, in 1832:

I must not hide from you the sad truth concerning the situation of the Civic Guard in the province of Luxembourg. Here, perhaps more so than anywhere else, the youthful successors of their ancestors' reputation for bravery, are full of enthusiasm for the cause of the September revolution and will fight for *la patrie en danger*. However, in Luxembourg, again maybe more so than everywhere else, the youth bends with difficulty to military discipline. Each wants to command, none wish to obey. Inactivity, or moreover, the recklessness of the majority of disciplinary councils, has completely demoralised the Civic Guard such as it is now organised.⁶⁹

Guards in certain Luxembourg districts, as elsewhere around the country, began to regularly miss exercises, which were mandatory for the first band, prompting a warning from de Theux.⁷⁰ Whereas the Governor could be expected to lay down the law to some who encouraged and even assisted

⁶⁶ *La Belgique Militaire*, 30 April 1871.

⁶⁷ AEA 030/3-114, Tabular return of information regarding Luxembourg Civic Guard units sent to Governor of Luxembourg, 8 May 1832.

⁶⁸ AER POS. 2515-372, Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, Demand of modifications to be made to the Law of 1848 by the Generals of Antwerp, Brussels, and Liège, 19 February 1895.

⁶⁹ AEA 030/3-114, Governor of Luxembourg to de Theux, 1 April 1832.

⁷⁰ AEA 030/3-317, De Theux to Governor of Luxembourg, 2 October 1832.

absenteeism, there was little that could be done about the election and reelection of ‘imbeciles’ whose popularity stemmed from consistently turning a blind eye to such misdemeanours.⁷¹

This situation was comparable with that recorded by Colonel David in Antwerp almost half a century later. Having inspected the Civic Guard across four exercises in April and May 1879, David appeared content with most of the rank and file present under arms. The senior NCOs and officers left much to be desired, however, with the latter tending to abuse their positions. Captains were noted for granting exemptions without the consent of their superiors, arriving late, demonstrating little enthusiasm in forming up their companies correctly, and generally exhibiting an ‘incredible weakness in their commands’.⁷² A report on the Civic Guard of Ixelles in 1900 demonstrated a problematic lack of uniformity in command between officers and NCOs, neither of which had a sufficient theoretical or practical knowledge to exercise control over the men. With company commanders applying their understanding in a different manner to that of Adjutant-Majors or even NCOs, the rank and file was left to feel ‘lost in the mass, without proper love, without interest and without initiative, marching against their wishes’.⁷³ In Ypres, *Le Progrès* reported the extraordinary case of Colonel Van Halen’s visit to inspect the Civic Guard only to find that a number had found the curiosities of the Antwerp Exposition too compelling to resist.⁷⁴ Occurrences such as this brought the effectiveness and resilience of the force into disrepute, and provided further ammunition to those who wished to either dispense with it entirely or reconstitute it on much tougher military lines.

The situation was not helped by tightening purse strings, which placed great pressures on already deficient equipment and facilities. Martial spirit was inexorably linked with the materiel available. Apart from the derisory role often attributed to it, the main challenge to the Civic Guard’s image centred on its weaponry.⁷⁵ To look the part was to be the part. Not surprisingly, it often struggled to obtain adequate equipment in its embryonic

⁷¹ AEA 030/3-318, Major of the Bouillon Civic Guard to Mayor of Bouillon, 20 August 1831; *La Belgique Militaire*, 7 May 1871.

⁷² MRA, Fonds Burgerwacht 288/31, Colonel David to Officers and Sergeant-Majors of the Antwerp Civic Guard. Order of the Day, 21 May 1879.

⁷³ Ibid., 98/A-zn-14, 1897–1920, Note on the Theoretical and Practical Instruction of Officers and Corporals of the Ixelles Civic Guard, 13 March 1900.

⁷⁴ *Le Progrès*, 28 June 1894.

⁷⁵ Verstraete, *Réorganisation*, p. 5.

form, resulting in many units being issued with pikes as opposed to fire-arms.⁷⁶ Reports from 149 battalions in the province of Luxembourg showed that only four cantons (25 battalions) could classify their resources as ‘complete’; two cantons (13 battalions) as ‘good’; eight cantons (59 battalions) as ‘good enough’; one canton (10 battalions) as ‘conforming to the law’; one canton (10 battalions) as ‘imperfect’; and three cantons (32 battalions) as simply ‘none’.⁷⁷ Even though some units were undoubtedly able to make do, the majority were not happy with the state of affairs. Indeed, it is evident that those battalions without the means to improve their situation were liable to fold without financial support from the commune, as was the case of Sint-Niklaas in 1835.⁷⁸

By the time the 1848 Law was introduced, an assessment of the weaponry available revealed equally appalling deficiencies. It appeared that the Bouillon battalions were equipped with the 1777 model musket, of which 15 of the 48 available required serious repairs and two were unserviceable.⁷⁹ More concerning, was the evaluation by the Mayor of Fauvillers who claimed that all 131 guns necessitated the work of an experienced armourer in order to return them to working order. This was accompanied by a note stating: ‘Few of these effects, be it guns or equipment, remain apt for service. Moreover, the guns are of an antiquated model, which is too heavy to be handled by incompetent hands’.⁸⁰ It reflected the opinion that amateur soldiery was incompatible with complicated weaponry. Despite being older men, or perhaps because of it, they were unable, through neglect or incompetence, to maintain their muskets to a sufficient standard. It lessened their military impact as well as martial spirit, rendering them unsuited for the tasks at hand.

Part of the State budget for the Civic Guard was intended to encourage the militarisation of society, through supporting the construction, maintenance, and use of shooting ranges. From the inaugural *Grand Tir*, bank-rolled by King Leopold II himself, through to subsequent events both at

⁷⁶ P.P.R. 26 May 1831; Jacobs, ‘Emblèmes’, vol. 19, no. 8, pp. 703–704.

⁷⁷ AEA 030/3-114, Tabular return of information regarding Luxembourg Civic Guard units sent to Governor of Luxembourg, 8 May 1832.

⁷⁸ Verschaeren, ‘De Burgerwacht te Sint-Niklaas-Waas’, vol. 19, no. 8, p. 679. Similar concerns were raised by Barthélémi Dumortier in Parliament the year before; P.P.R., 26 April 1834.

⁷⁹ AEA 030/3-235, Report on the armament and equipment of the Bouillon Civic Guard, 12 September 1848.

⁸⁰ Ibid., Mayor of Fauvillers to Governor of Luxembourg, 10 July 1848.

home and abroad, the Civic Guard received financial aid to participate. In 1880, for example, Guardsmen were encouraged to compete in Vienna and were provided with the incentive of the latest Comblain rifles on loan for a deposit of 90 francs and 75 centimes, which would be returned to them after the competition.⁸¹ Good marksmanship was prized, and improvements were encouraged through obligatory target practice. The State provided ₣43,000 for target practice alone in 1897, raising that to ₣75,000 by 1900. However, while it could provide for some new and improved facilities—Belgium had 22 ranges of 100 metres or more by 1900—it still fell short of requirements.⁸² The Ministry of the Interior's official report following the General Inspection of 1911 justly appeared satisfied with the progress in the quality of marksmanship among the Civic Guard but lamented the continued lack of ranges outside of the country's urban centres. It noted the importance of such facilities by recognising '[t]he confidence that a man has in his weapon and in his ability to use it is, for him, the best guarantee of his moral strength in critical circumstances'.⁸³

Civil authorities, at both governmental and local levels, did attempt to alleviate some of the financial pressures placed on the auxiliary forces. Equipment and facilities took the lion's share of funds in each province and, by and large, their total outlay reflected the size of the Civic Guard within their geographical boundaries.⁸⁴ Until the 1897 reforms, the State tended to roughly match the outlay of the highest spending province, Brabant, and to distribute this across all nine. Following this, however, it quadrupled its financial support to propel its programme of militarisation into being.⁸⁵ The State, naturally, also financed the equipment and training for the Gendarmerie as a fully-fledged internal police force—in their case Albini rifles and Remington-Nagant pistols—but surprisingly did not take responsibility for their billets until the turn of the century. Prior to that, the cost of Gendarme barracks had been at the expense of the commune dating back to the Law of 30 April 1836. Under the new system, which sought to improve the conditions of service for the ever-expanding force, each man was, as much as possible, to have his own

⁸¹ AEA 030/3-321, Rolin-Jacquemyns to Governor of Luxembourg, 26 June 1880.

⁸² *Exposé 1900, Tome I*, p. 396.

⁸³ Ministry of the Interior, *Administration de la Garde Civique et de la Milice: Inspections générales de 1911* (Guyot Frères Éditeurs, 1911), pp. 7–8.

⁸⁴ *Exposé 1900, Tome I*, p. 399.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

room, and married men were to be given separate family quarters. The process of modernisation naturally took some time to complete due to the equally debilitating financial constraints. Some 179 provincial barracks had to be bought back for interim use while the new lodgings were constructed. By the end of 1900, 35 new buildings had already been completed.⁸⁶

After 1839, the opportunities for the Civic Guard to prove itself in action were limited. Barring a minor role in the Army of Observation during the Franco-Prussian War, the only active service that the Civic Guard undertook against an external threat was during the First World War. Between these events, its role lay predominantly in the sphere of internal policing, for which it was only marginally better-suited. From the outset, one of the main difficulties faced by the authorities in the deployment of the Civic Guard was the complicated process of calling it out. The local mayor, the mayor of a neighbouring commune, the Provincial Governor, *Commissaires d'Arrondissement*, and Justices of the Peace in the civilian domain, as well as the local military authority or the Territorial Commander, could nominally take this decision. Charles Dubois argued in the Chamber of Representatives that this was a result of the haste in which territorial boundaries had been established for the Civic Guard in 1830, which had not been amended when the new district, judiciary, and cantonal demarcations were established.⁸⁷ This led to some confusion, as seen on numerous occasions throughout the nineteenth century. The anti-Orangist riots of the 1830s were marred by the uncoordinated and, at times, overzealous actions of some units.⁸⁸ Similarly, the anti-Catholic riots of 1857 witnessed confusion when General Adolphe Alexis Capiaumont went above the civil authorities in committing 600 troops to the streets of Ghent.⁸⁹ The army did not contest the civil authorities' control during peacetime but, when faced with a threat to the State, often felt duty-bound to take the initiative because of

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 477.

⁸⁷ P.P.R., 26 May 1834.

⁸⁸ G. Deneckere, 'De plundering van de orangistische adel in April 1834: de komplottheorie voorbij', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, vol. 26, no. 3–4 (1996), pp. 43–48.

⁸⁹ For the Capiaumont Affair, see L. Keunings, 'L'armée et le maintien de l'ordre au XIXe siècle. L'affaire Capiaumont (1857)', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 30, no. 7 (1994), pp. 493–540; F. Van Kalken, *Commotions populaires en Belgique, 1834–1902* (Office de Publicité, Brussels, 1936), pp. 43–50; Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, p. 166.

the Territorial Commander's senior rank.⁹⁰ It remained somewhat undetermined, although increased emphasis was placed on the mayor to assess the local situation before acting accordingly.

Irrespective of where the power of command rested, the more pressing issue undoubtedly lay in the level of trust that could be placed in the Civic Guard when it was eventually called out to face an internal crisis. During disturbances in Brussels on 6 April 1834, the citizen militia had remained conspicuously absent on account of there being no military presence to be of support, leading to many guards preferring to remain at home to defend their own families and properties.⁹¹ Ironically, as explained by Leopold I to Chazal in 1861, the operational procedure dictated that 'all civil strife must be repressed by the local police force, supported by the citizen militia; the army cannot, and must not, get involved, whilst these forces have not been beaten'.⁹² Events throughout the nineteenth century would certainly put this to the test.

The first real threat came in 1848, known in Belgium as the *Risquons-Tout* affair, in which the Civic Guard acquitted itself relatively well. Across Europe, Liberal-Nationalists sought to throw off the shackles of absolutist rule in the Year of Revolutions. Key members of the old order, such as Metternich, fell from power; new constitutions were drafted; and, across the border from Belgium, France ushered in the Second Republic under Louis Napoléon Bonaparte. In Brussels, however, the revolutionary movement was over before it ever truly began. Along with Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands, Belgium made timely concessions that subdued any significant opposition, while simultaneously retaining the essence of its relatively recent, and much revered, liberal constitution. The republican movement had difficulty in shaking the relatively stable constitutional monarchy, particularly given the astute leadership of Charles Rogier, who broadened the suffrage to appease potentially disaffected middle class elements, and by addressing the economic concerns of workers.⁹³ In another move, dangerous intel-

⁹⁰ For more on this, see P. Lefèvre, 'Le Maintien de l'ordre au niveau provincial', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 25, no. 3 (1983), pp. 201–229.

⁹¹ P.P.R., 29 April 1834.

⁹² Anonymous, *La Répression des Émeutes par la Garde Civique: Conférence* (Ongers-Mols, Brussels, 1882), pp. 9–11; Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, p. 166.

⁹³ M. Rapport, *1848: Year of Revolution* (Abacus, London, 2009), pp. 98–100; R. Gildea, *Barricades and Borders: Europe 1800–1914* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996), p. 80.

lectuals, among them Karl Marx, were removed from the country. By the time a group of Belgian republicans and Francophiles, together with some Frenchmen, formed the *Légion Belge* with the support of the Provisional Government in Paris, the base of popular support had already dissipated. On 30 March, in a little hamlet of Risquons-Tout near Mouscron on the French border, they were beaten back by a combined effort of Civic Guards, Gendarmerie, and the army. After a lively firefight, which cost the Belgian forces of order just one dead and six wounded, the 1,500 strong republican force faded away.⁹⁴ This proved to be the zenith of the Civic Guard's participation in the maintenance of order after 1830.

Recent studies have shown how intent the authorities were on using 'the visual power of political imagery through iconography within its counterrevolutionary efforts as well as its self-glorification' after 1848.⁹⁵ As such, it is not surprising to find the Civic Guard—the guardians of the 1830 Revolution—at the heart of the commemorative process. Royal, and by extension, national recognition of their accomplishments was shown through the awarding of colours and memorial engravings to 34 legions across Belgium.⁹⁶ It was, after all, a significant moment for the country. As D. H. Thomas has suggested, sceptics of the Belgian 'experiment' in neutrality had, until this point, believed that a lack of national spirit would see the country blindly follow France into war or revolution. The fact that it had not proved the doubters wrong. Belgium emerged from 1848 with renewed prestige and greater international respect for its neutral status.⁹⁷ The auxiliary forces had certainly played their part. Out of the brief crisis, a reinvigorated Civic Guard emerged with a raised profile and improved image within society, which helped to propel the 1848 Law into being. Although initially seen as a positive solidifying piece of legislation guaranteeing the institution's continued existence, it soon became a double-edged sword with an increased burden that accompanied an expanded role.

⁹⁴H. Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique des Origines à Nos Jours* (La Renaissance du Livre, Brussels, 1972–1975), Tome IV, p. 424.

⁹⁵S. Huygebaert, 'Unshakeable Foundations: An Iconological Study of the Belgian Constitutional Cult following the 1848 Revolution', *Journal of Belgian History*, vol. 45, no. 4 (2015), pp. 11–12.

⁹⁶Jacobs, 'Emblèmes', vol. 20, no. 2, p. 148; AEA 030/3-119, Rogier to Governor of Luxembourg, 5 January 1850.

⁹⁷Thomas, *The Guarantee*, p. 103.

By the time of the social upheaval of the 1886 riots, the Civic Guard had already, as has been demonstrated, begun to decline. What were initially no more than isolated disturbances in the previous year in Hainaut, Brussels, and Antwerp spontaneously erupted into a national strike. The conflagration, centred in the Meuse basin, created a domino effect across factories of all industries that were literally set ablaze. The influx of American cereals had added further pressure to the European economic crisis of 1884, which finally reached a boiling point two years later. Salaries dropped, and unemployment rose.⁹⁸ Much like recent events in Britain, the United States, the Netherlands, and Madrid, economic depression induced strike action—although in Belgium this was shielded from public view by the seeming ignorance of the press.⁹⁹ Consequently, the severity of the situation was initially lost on the authorities, but it soon became evident that a large-scale mobilisation of the *Force Publique* would be required to restore order. On occasion, such as in Roux on 26 March where 5,000 workers had caused ₣1,000,000 worth of damage to the glassworks factories, the army was called out to offer support to brutal and bloody effect. Following a failed charge by some 30 Lancers, the infantry opened fire killing four rioters. The following day, an increased military presence resulted in another volley into an assembled crowd killing 12, while two more deaths were reported in Bascoup on the 29 March before the terrible events could be drawn to a close.¹⁰⁰ Such extreme expressions of violence had come to be expected from the army and Gendarmerie, reinforcing the need for a strong Civic Guard to take more moderate control of the situation. Nevertheless, the Government's decision to call for the spontaneous creation of *Corps Spéciaux* to counter the immediate threat was a clear indication of how the institution had meandered its way into idleness over the preceding decades.

Largely on account of its lack of training, the Civic Guard was often not placed in the direct line of fire for fear of what inexperience might produce. Indeed, in the Tournai area where 600 rioters were confronted by the Civic Guard, the *Chasseurs Éclaireurs*, and the Gendarmerie, it was the latter two who undertook the more strenuous roles. While the Civic

⁹⁸ Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique*, Tome V, pp. 115–116.

⁹⁹ Van Kalken, *Commotions Populaires*, pp. 77–78.

¹⁰⁰ Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, pp. 168–169; KLM (ed.), *Gendarmerie*, p. 261.

Guard secured the *Hôtel de Ville*, the Gendarmerie charged twice amidst a hail of rocks, causing enough casualties in sabre and gunshot wounds to break up the riotous group and restore order.¹⁰¹ The Gendarmerie took the plaudits on this occasion, but the Civic Guard had received its own in Charleroi the previous day for the steadfastness and restraint shown. *Le Bien Public* noted in glowing, albeit somewhat surprised terms:

It was the first encounter that, in these circumstances, our citizen militia has had with the disturbers of the peace, and we can confirm that it came out with its honour intact. Our congratulations to the commanders; they proved that they could couple zeal with restraint.¹⁰²

Notwithstanding this, the performance of the Civic Guard did not convince everyone. An 1886 pamphlet by an officer of the Civic Guard rightly pointed out that its units did not actually do very much, and what it did do, it did in self-defence and at higher material and manpower cost than the army or the Gendarmerie.¹⁰³ Indeed, as Pierre Leclercq pointed out, the perception was very much that the Civic Guard was ‘two-paced’, with the *Corps Spéciaux* demonstrating the virtues of a good attitude and military training in contrast to *les bleus* whose shortages in both aspects saw them relegated to a peripheral role.¹⁰⁴

Although some units were clearly proving to be of use as an aid to the civil power, others began to demonstrate the reasons why the ‘mayor’s army’, as it had come to be known, slowly lost the trust of those with the power to call it out.¹⁰⁵ In Chanly, a small town in the Province of Luxembourg situated approximately 30 miles west of Bastogne, the Mayor wrote with alarm to the *Commissaire d’Arrondissement* concerning the turn-out rate of the nonactive units under his authority who had been called out to protect nearby factory buildings and their owners. The letter read: ‘The majority of the Civic Guard lends itself willingly to this chore, however, there are a certain number of recalcitrant members who, not

¹⁰¹ *Le Bien Public*, 30 March 1886.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 29 March 1886.

¹⁰³ Goffinet, *De l’Inutilité et du Danger de la Garde Civique aux points de vue Politique & Militaire* (Alexandre Berqueman, Brussels, 1886), pp. 23–30.

¹⁰⁴ P. Leclercq, *Histoire de la Garde Civique: L’Exemple du Bataillon des Chasseurs-Éclaireurs de Liège* (Labor Quai du Commerce, Brussels, 2005), p. 117.

¹⁰⁵ This term has appeared in both Van Kalken, ‘Ce que fut’, p. 549, and Balace, ‘Soldats ou civils?’, p. 817.

only do not want to undertake any service but, are attempting to dissuade those who are well disposed'.¹⁰⁶ Despite not providing a reason for such an act of sedition, conclusions may still be drawn from the universal suffrage protests of 1902, when guards refused to conduct repressive acts on account of conscience or politics. The changing social and political landscape of Belgium towards the end of the nineteenth century altered the perception of many liberal thinkers within the force.

Frans Van Kalken has attempted to underplay the political issues preventing the Civic Guard from fulfilling its duties as an aid to the civil power by claiming that, apart from an incident of mass disobedience by the Brussels corps in 1834 in which some 6,000 men refused to put down an anti-Orangist demonstration, no other serious refusal to soldier undermined the force.¹⁰⁷ He notes that only three of the 35,000 guards mobilised during the 1902 crisis, including the eminent lawyer Paul Spaak, refused to load their rifles. Yet, reports of entire platoons revolting, offering to fund the strikes themselves, and running amok while singing the *Marseillaise*, somewhat challenge that assertion.¹⁰⁸ Spaak, the father of the future Socialist Prime Minister of Belgium, and Secretary-General of NATO, Paul-Henri Spaak, was undoubtedly a vocal critic of the use of force in this matter, but certainly by no means just one of three. He expressed his views in an open letter in *Le Peuple* explaining the motivations behind his refusal to participate, which he believed was mirrored in other guards; it is worth quoting at length:

The maintenance of order is, in effect, nothing but the defence of the Government, because if order reigns tomorrow, the Government will triumph. I refuse to defend the Catholic Government. The Defence of our institutions implies the defence of a political regime that I detest. I refuse to do anything that will prolong it. [...] I do not want to find myself either, obliged to undertake such a reprehensible thing: to kill a man, however violent, however angry he might be momentarily. Equally, I cannot allow the officer commanding me to believe that I will obey his orders. Having assisted the other night at an arms exercise, I witnessed up close the profound, sincere, ineffable emotion of the captain of my company, who was contemplating the measures that he might be forced to take and the

¹⁰⁶ AEA 030/3-322, Mayor of Chanly to the Commissaire d'Arondissement, 9 April 1886.

¹⁰⁷ Van Kalken, 'Ce que fut', pp. 556–557.

¹⁰⁸ *Le Peuple*, 20 April 1902.

responsibility that was weighing on him. I thought, that night, that it would satisfy my conscience if I simply did not make use of the cartridges that I had been given, or to shoot them in the air, as certainly many other guards would do, though I understood that this would be betraying the confidence that this man, who would honestly be doing what he judged to be his duty, had in me.¹⁰⁹

As a result, he refused the call-out to avoid this delicate state of affairs. The striking thing about this piece, apart from the political overtones, was the shift in perception within a guard about the ultimate role of the force from one of internal policing, which he could no longer condone, to that of the more morally righteous mission of national defence. The conflict was no longer exclusively between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie as such, despite the social upheaval, but increasingly between personal beliefs in the rights of the individual against the power of a government, which represented the old order and sat uncomfortably in the Liberal institution that was the Civic Guard.

Rare incidents, such as that outside of Schollaert's home, during which the Civic Guard shot eight protestors while helping the Gendarmerie shepherd the Minister of the Interior inside, only helped fuel the fire. *Le Peuple*, which reported the affair, exclaimed: 'The Government of murderers must go!', thus reinforcing the moral of Spaak's appeal.¹¹⁰ It placed the Civic Guard in an impossible position, attempting to fulfil its constitutional duty of securing internal order at a time when socially, politically, and militarily it was not up to the task. The bourgeois element that had traditionally sought to curb dangerous social movements now appeared somewhat unreliable under Catholic parliamentary dominance. Only twice was it reported that the 'instrument of class' was used in such a manner, killing six miners in Mons in April 1893 and a further nine at a demonstration for universal suffrage in Leuven in 1902. The latter of these cases was subsequently identified as an unleashing of personal passions by Catholic officers opposed to the democratic movement.¹¹¹ The politicisation of the force deepened the concern surrounding its loyalty. Mayors could no longer count on it in the event of social unrest and

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 16 April 1902.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 19 April 1902.

¹¹¹ Van Kalken, 'Ce que fut', pp. 550–551. Other figures suggest 7 killed and 15 wounded—see Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, p. 172.

looked increasingly towards the Gendarmerie as a neutral quasi-military force to restore order.

After its greatest test in August 1914, the Civic Guard reacted with the patriotic fervour expected of a nation under attack. Large numbers of nonactive members presented themselves to the authorities to be enlisted in active units. Still, there was a reluctance within the Government to accept their services for anything more than simple police tasks alongside the active Civic Guard, which itself had not been officially mobilised as was required by law.¹¹² While this has traditionally been seen as an oversight resulting from the chaos of 4 August 1914, it has been suggested by Pete Veldeman that it was a conscious decision emanating from an 1893 report that questioned the corps' ability to contribute to national defence in the event of invasion.¹¹³ A circular had been issued to all Provincial Governors on 6 August outlining, in strict terms, the laws of war by which Civic Guard units should abide. Emphasis was placed on the wearing of uniforms with distinctive markings that would clearly distinguish them from *Franc Tireurs*, which would be even more apparent if an officer or NCO was present to lead them as a military formation.¹¹⁴ Being issued by the Ministry of the Interior, however, it demonstrated the continued civilian nature of the force in legal terms. Although it did engage in some minor actions, which were later used as an excuse for German reprisals, most Civic Guard units adhered to the advice issued by the authorities to perform policing duties until the enemy came into view, after which they were to withdraw.¹¹⁵

In any case, they were not prepared for combat as exemplified in the writings of the American war correspondent, Edward Alexander Powell, in which he penned the following account:

¹¹² AEA 030/3-323, Circular from Ministry of the Interior to the Provincial Governors, 11 August 1914.

¹¹³ P. Veldeman, 'Trapped in a Legal No-Man's Land?' The Extraordinary Case of the Belgian Civic Guard in 1914, in M. De Koster et al. (eds.), *Justice in Wartime and Revolutions: Europe, 1795–1950* (Algemeen Rijksarchief, Brussels, 2012), pp. 361–362.

¹¹⁴ AEA 030/3-323, Circular from Ministry of the Interior to the Provincial Governors, 6 August 1914.

¹¹⁵ For more on German reprisals against suspected *Franc Tireurs*, see J. Horne and A. Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2001), pp. 19–20, 26, 32–33, 44, 65–66, 77, and 89–139; J. Lipkes, *Rehearsals: The German Army in Belgium, August 1914* (Leuven University Press, Leuven, 2007), pp. 46–57.

The force of citizen soldiery known as the [Civic Guard] has, so far as I am aware, no exact counterpart in any other country. It is composed of business and professional men whose chief duties, prior to the war, had been to show themselves on occasions of ceremony arrayed in gorgeous uniforms. Early in the war the Germans announced that they would not recognize the [Civic Guard] as combatants, and that any of them who were captured while fighting would meet with the same fate as armed civilians. This drastic ruling resulted in many amusing episodes. When it was learned that the Germans were approaching [Ghent], 1,600 civil guardsmen threw their rifles into the canal and, stripping off their uniforms, ran about in the pink and light-blue under-garments which the Belgians affect, frantically begging the townspeople to lend them civilian clothing.¹¹⁶

This demonstrates that the force had forsaken its military role by the outbreak of war to the point where it was all but irrelevant. Certainly, the possibility of an individual taking action against the invader as he approached his home was real, but action *en masse* was never seriously contemplated and the force was officially disbanded on 12 October 1914 to avoid any further confusion.

From an expression of bourgeois militarism to a politicised ambiguity, the Civic Guard exemplified the fabric behind the irregular militarisation of Belgian society during the nineteenth century. Its ostensibly middle class composition nominally ensured the fulfilment of its roles to safeguard the 1830 Revolution from above—as a counterweight to despotic oppression—and from below against social upheaval. Enshrined in its constitutional existence, however, the force encountered some of its most damaging inconsistencies, which, when abused to the extent to which they were, ensured its slow decline at the expense of the more militarily established—though less exclusive—Gendarmerie. Although retaining its bourgeois character, particularly after 1853, the antimilitarism that had come to exemplify this group's attitude towards military service in the army became prevalent in its attitude towards the Civic Guard. Yet, in a strange turn of events, the prospect of widening the social composition of the institution to which they were unhappily wedded struck an even greater chord of discontent, fear, and anxiety when combined with the possible threat of the International.

Thus, the Civic Guard ambled through the mid-nineteenth century devoid of the necessary inspiration and impetus to be reconstituted as a

¹¹⁶ E. A. Powell, quoted in Veldeman, 'Legal No-Man's Land?', pp. 360–361.

useful military force. Equipment was poor, facilities sparse, and training often laughable. Inculcating a sense of militarism into a social group that had traditionally sought to escape such a charge proved difficult, despite local, State, and Royal funding. An unwillingness among the majority of conscripted men capable of supplying their own uniform to spend more to join the more militarised and better-equipped *Corps Speciaux* proved difficult enough during times of crisis, let alone during peace, when the State could not afford to spend millions of francs reoutfitting the entire force. To look the part was to be the part; but if the former was difficult to achieve in the first place, the latter proved impossible to impose in isolation without running the risk of disaffecting what *La Belgique Militaire* called the 'armed electoral body'.¹¹⁷ As such, it had to be conceded that improvements in effectiveness were unlikely when 'the social education is so contrary to its military education; the principles of discipline, abnegation, duty, sacrifice, are very difficult to inculcate in a nation that extensively uses all of its liberties, and above all that of criticising authority in all its forms'.¹¹⁸

Such fears were proved rather correct during the social riots of the 1880s and 1900s. Whereas the Civic Guard had provided useful assistance during the *Risquons-Tout* affair in 1848, its subsequent performances when tasked with repressive actions were less than impressive. Certainly, the lack of adequate training, equipment, and leadership were partly to blame, but the fundamental cause of the Civic Guard's marginalisation by the end of the nineteenth century was the Liberal monopolisation of its ranks following the 1848 Law restricting active units to the major cities and towns of the country. Although the predominantly bourgeois composition was, in theory, the surest safeguard against the rise of socialist unrest, the domination of the Catholic Party in the Government from 1884 until the outbreak of war saw a realignment of political associations. Common ground on issues such as universal suffrage and anti-clericalism drew closer these unlikely bedfellows. In so doing, the Civic Guard's reliability was questioned even further. Secondary roles when called out as an aid to the civil power were almost inevitable, particularly for *les bleus* whose lack of discipline was an added concern to the authorities. It resulted in the army and Gendarmerie

¹¹⁷ *Belgique Militaire*, 20 May 1883.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8 October 1876.

usurping the roles traditionally attributed to the citizen militia—albeit to more bloody effect. The increase in size of the Gendarmerie was testament to the faith shown in its zeal and effectiveness in being the State bulwark against social upheaval by the dawn of the twentieth century. Its apolitical nature, professional composition, and structured organisation made it a more appropriate tool for internal policing than the so-called ‘people’s army’, which struggled to define itself as an institution or to find its role within society. It is perhaps not too radical to suggest that *La Belgique Militaire*’s conclusion was not too wide of the mark when it proposed: ‘If the Civic Guard did not exist, [one] would refrain from inventing it’.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 20 October 1872.

Fortress Policy and Strategy

Amidst the lengthy debates concerning the organisation and role of the field army between 1830 and 1914, Belgium was also burdened with conflicting concepts of how to integrate the large numbers of forts it had inherited into its military system. The way this was done came to dictate strategic planning, and it reflected the extent to which the nation wished to uphold its neutrality through a show of arms. Even preceding the time of Vauban, control of the territory's vital roads and waterways had been militarily essential, leading to a tradition of fortified towns, cities, and emplacements that spanned the length and breadth of the country.¹ This is not insignificant. Chris Pearson has suggested that the process of militarisation occurs 'through and, at times, against, the environment'.² As such, the hope that somehow the burden that accompanied these isolated military outposts might be lifted after independence was indicative of the population's

¹For a general overview of the many fortifications and sieges in present-day Belgium from the fifteenth century until the 1830 Revolution, see H. Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique des Origines à Nos Jours*, Vol. III (La Renaissance du Livre, Brussels, 1972–1975), pp. 79–80, 225–226, 234–239, 280–284, and 315–318. For their strategic importance during the War of Spanish Succession, see J. Ostwald, 'The Decisive Battle of Ramillies 1706; Prerequisites for Decision in Early Modern Warfare', *Journal of Military History*, vol. 64, no. 3 (2000), pp. 649–677.

²C. Pearson, *Mobilizing Nature: The Environmental History of War and Militarization in Modern France* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2012), p. 4; see also pp. 1–10.

feelings at large. As with other aspects of military organisations, local aspirations inhibited the development of sound military planning on a national scale that required the maintenance and expansion of some of these places. The enlargement of Antwerp into an entrenched camp (*camp retranché*), to act as a national redoubt, was delayed by widespread protests from the largely antimilitaristic commercial population, despite the risk of invasion having increased after the events of 1848. Similar objections were raised during the 1880s and again after the turn of the century, when diplomatic and technological changes forced a redevelopment of the Meuse and Antwerp fortifications, respectively. The significant difference this time was the political battle that accompanied the works, which became embroiled in a larger, interwoven issue of finances and military reorganisation.³

Although the means by which Belgian strategy was upheld altered over time, the theory itself remained largely unchanged from 1859 onwards. The principle of concentrating the army's limited forces under the protection of Antwerp, rather than dispersing them across several frontier points, remained intact throughout the century. Notwithstanding alterations in the type of invasion likely to confront them, Belgian planners rarely strayed from the concept of operating outside of the central triangle between Namur, Liège, and Antwerp, with the latter acting as its Jominian base of operations. Even when entering the failed staff conversations with the British in the decade preceding the outbreak of war, little formal evolution in strategy occurred, despite some isolated attempts. Ultimately, in 1914, Belgium reverted to something akin to its established plans for want of a more defined alternative. It opted to mobilise and concentrate within its zone of operations awaiting the first transgressor of its neutrality, all the while retaining the option of retreating to Antwerp to welcome aid should the necessity arise.

Following the Revolution, Belgium inherited a series of fortifications that became both irrelevant and obstructive. The Wellington Barrier, as it was called, had been established in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars as a defensive system against future French aggression, shielding the Netherlands until help arrived from either Britain or Prussia.⁴ Its

³ Some aspects of the political-wrangling concerning the construction of fortifications in Belgium have been succinctly outlined in, D. Stevenson, 'Fortifications and the European Balance before 1914', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 35, no. 6 (2012), pp. 845–847.

⁴ J. E. Kaufmann and H. W. Kaufmann, *The Forts and Fortifications of Europe 1815–1945. The Neutral States: The Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland* (Pen & Sword Military, Barnsley, 2014), pp. 82–83.

strongpoints traversed the country in four intersecting lines dominating positions of strategic value. The first of these, running from Oostende, through Nieupoort, Ypres, Menin, Tournai, Ghent, and Dendermonde to Antwerp, was designed to offer the British a safe point for continental disembarkation along the Belgian coast. The second series, running from Luxembourg, to Venlo, via Bouillon, Philippeville, Mariembourg, Dinant, Namur, Huy, Liège, and Maastricht, offered protection to Prussia and provided a point of entry along the Meuse and the Sambre where an intervention to be required there. A third series of forts closed the gap between the Meuse and the Scheldt, with Ath, Mons, and Charleroi designed to cover the movements of an army parallel to the French border. Finally, there was a fourth series of forts covering the ground between the Waal and the tributaries of the Meuse and Rhine that were intended to protect the Dutch provinces farther north.⁵

Whilst certainly offering the expanded Netherlands protection from France, they offered little viable assurance for a newly independent Belgium. First, the sheer cost of maintaining the many structures was beyond the initial capabilities of the State purse, while the ability of the army to provide as many as 60,000 men to cover the garrison that had been provided by the Great Powers before the Revolution was impractical given the state of war against the Dutch until 1839. Herein lay the second issue, for the Netherlands, not France, was Belgium's primary enemy for the foreseeable future. Indeed, it was with French help that the last Dutch forces were finally expelled from these very fortifications, the Antwerp citadel, after a protracted siege in 1832.⁶ Yet, many of these structures sat uncomfortably on the Franco-Belgian border and were a reminder to Louis-Philippe of a 'collective European suspicion'.⁷ The redundancy of these fortifications was further highlighted when Belgium accepted the status of perpetual neutrality. Not only was the Wellington Barrier ineffective against a probable Dutch incursion from the north, but it was also no longer acceptable while it was directed solely against France.

⁵ F. Chazal, *Discours prononcés par M. le Lieutenant Général Baron Chazal, Ministre de la Guerre. Discussion du Projet d'Aggrandissement Général d'Anvers* (Deltombe, Brussels, 1859), pp. 5–6.

⁶ É. Wanty, *Le Milieu Militaire Belge de 1831 à 1914* (Palais des Académies, Brussels, 1957), p. 32; E. Witte, *Le Royaume Perdu: Les Orangistes Belges Contre la Revolution 1828–1850* (Samsa s.p.r.l, Brussels, 2014), pp. 330–336.

⁷ D. H. Thomas, *The Guarantee of Belgian Independence and Neutrality in European Diplomacy, 1830s–1930s* (Thomas Publishing, Kingston, RI, 1983), pp. 28–29.

Nevertheless, the Great Powers remained wary of French intentions, and they recognised the feasibility of Louis-Philippe extending his influence into Belgium by occupying some of the very fortifications they deemed to be threatening. The Fortress Convention of 14 December 1831, which had proceeded without French representation, reflected this fact. It allowed Belgium to maintain certain fortifications that it was capable of defending, but insisted that others—particularly those in direct reach of the French—be dismantled immediately.⁸ The old citadels of Ghent, Namur, La Chartreuse at Liège, and Termonde (the latter built in 1584) were retained along with the fortified place of Diest. Defensive works at Oostende, Nieuwpoort, Mons, Tournai, Charleroi, Huy, Dinant, and Bouillon were to be demolished. Initially, King Leopold I offered no objection, seeing this as a cost-effective way of securing peace, prosperity, and independence for his kingdom. Delays in the ratification of the treaty, and subsequent issues emanating from it, however, saw a postponement in proceedings until 1839. Thereafter, Belgium refused to comply fully because a large portion of its Limburg province was being restored to the Dutch upon the conclusion of the XXIV Articles of the Treaty of London.⁹ Despite seemingly in conflict with its obligations, the Belgian authorities were content to allow the matter to drift. With no immediate threat, the country appeared satisfied to develop its commercial and industrial capacities, which had been restricted under Dutch rule. Leopold I's stubbornness was not indefinite. Over time, the designated strongpoints were dismantled on cost-saving, as well as diplomatic, grounds. In doing so, the militarised landscape of Belgium was significantly altered and forced a reconsideration of its strategic planning.

Some retained an interest in the fortifications, but only to the extent of arguing, as they would for decades to come, that their presence would allow for a reduction in the size of the field army.¹⁰ Clearly, this made little military sense and placed too much faith in the conscientiousness of the guarantor powers. It ostensibly called for the reduction of the army to a mere garrison force, with the nominal support of the absent and ill-equipped Civic Guard in a country with a geographical location that offered few assurances.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 29 and 392.

⁹ A. De Ryckel, *Historique de l'Établissement Militaire de la Belgique Tome I* (Gent, 1907), pp. 203–206.

¹⁰ P.P.R., 3 August 1858.

Notwithstanding attempts to reorganise the army to achieve an establishment of 80,000 men, the realities of the recruitment system saw but a fraction of this figure with the colours at any one time. Training, indefinite leave, and experiments with a reserve all contributed to lowering the numbers available for national defence. Of greater influence was the alarmingly high wastage rate of the early years. Deficiencies in the establishment of 28% in 1836 and 1837 were only marginally improved to 23% a decade later.¹¹ Even at its full complement, the army could not hope to provide enough men to fulfil both roles of garrisoning the remnants of the Wellington Barrier as well as fielding a supporting army.

Not until faced with the external threats of revolution in 1848, followed by Louis-Napoléon's coup to dissolve the French National Assembly in 1851, did the question of national defence resurface with any urgency. A French invasion seemed likely, while peace with the Netherlands was far from assured in the long term. If anything, Belgium's numerous defensive works began to be viewed as restrictive and dangerous because of the necessity to disperse the army across the country's garrisons. This was certainly the opinion of General Félix Chazal, the first advocate of transforming Antwerp into an entrenched camp. In 1859, defending the principle that he had championed for a decade, he stated:

I will repeat, that to be spread out among twenty different points, is to be weak everywhere: by contrast, to be united at a single point, having behind one a good base of operations, a solid fulcrum where all military resources will be concentrated, all the provisions, all the materiel, from where we can break out in force, to bring a compact and well organised mass to bear at the point where its actions will produce the greatest effect, is to be strong everywhere.¹²

Despite the revival of the Civic Guard during the crisis, Belgium's manpower issue certainly indicated this. Deliberations into how Belgium might best resist a direct invasion from a more powerful neighbour swiftly returned a verdict in concert with Chazal's theory, and by 1851 a systematic dismantling of several forts began.

Neutrality brought its own set of problems to the formulation of a defensive strategy. Since the 1830s, Belgium had been pressured by its

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Chazal, *Discours*, pp. 12–13.

neighbours to either strengthen or shrink its military capabilities as and when perceived advantages for their respective enemies emerged. From a military point of view, however, the ability to develop a strategic plan of action that would allow the army to operate on the central Belgian plain between the Meuse and the Scheldt, using specially selected strongpoints to act as pivots, bridgeheads, and fallbacks, was now a national question of the first order. Nonetheless, as with many other aspects of military and social reform, cost and local considerations proved problematic. Fortifications were expensive and would likely provoke an expansion of the army to man them. Naturally, there was little enthusiasm from the electorate, particularly once the immediate danger of 1848 had passed. On a local level, too, the prospect of simplifying Belgium's mobilisation, concentration, and operational plans was met with equal consternation. The loss or reduction of garrisons, resulting from the dismantling of outdated fortifications in places, such as Ypres, Menin, Ath, Bouillon, Philippeville, and Mariembourg, had economic consequences.¹³ Beverloo provided the optimal example, whereby the surrounding area had expanded along with the camp, providing a significant boost to the local economy—albeit with some morally questionable activities.¹⁴ A rather exasperated Minister of Foreign Affairs summed it up: '[W]hen we build fortifications, the towns complain; when we demolish fortifications, the towns complain; the towns always complain when they hope to obtain concessions from the treasury'.¹⁵

Conversely, Namur pleaded to have its fortifications demolished entirely in 1856 because of the stifling effect they had on industry. The new railway link to Luxembourg had increased the volume of freight entering the city and was likely to see further lines connected in the future. Yet, because the primary consideration in the development of the Belgian railways was to integrate them into an international system of trade, little consideration had been given to their effect on national defence.¹⁶ Instead of providing

¹³ P.P.R., 4 March, 3 June, and 7 December 1853; *Le Progrès*, 14 April 1853; *Le Propagateur*, 15 June 1853.

¹⁴ J. Hoegaerts, *Masculinity and Nationhood, 1830–1910: Constructions of Identity and Citizenship in Belgium* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014), p. 51.

¹⁵ P.P.R., 7 December 1853.

¹⁶ For more on the development of Belgian railways, see M. Laffut, 'Belgium', in P. O'Brien (ed.), *Railways and the Economic Development of Western Europe, 1830–1914* (Macmillan Press, Basingstoke, 1983), pp. 203–226.

an argument against further construction of the network, it was used as a reason by Representatives for dismantling existing fortifications.¹⁷ Namur, however, in conjunction with Liège, held a strategically important point on the Meuse that was recognised in the developing discussions concerning the role of Antwerp, the army, and national defence. The six committees that sat between 1847 and 1856, which received input from 18 generals, ten other senior officers from across all arms, and 15 civilians from both the Chamber of Representatives and the Senate, concluded that the Meuse valley had to remain fortified to support the emerging strategic system of concentration.¹⁸

The conversion of Antwerp into an impregnable bastion upon which to concentrate the forces of the nation was first conceived by Chazal in 1847. It built on previous ideas that, in the event of invasion, the Royal Family, Government, and army might fall back on the commercial centre to await succour from Belgium's guarantors.¹⁹ Located at the extremities of the country behind the few natural defensive obstacles available, with accessible routes for resupply, Antwerp was a more logical choice as a final stronghold than Brussels. The Scheldt estuary to the north, which could be inundated by the defenders, offered further opportunities to deny an enemy access to their preferred theatre of operations.²⁰ The diplomatic climate of the early 1850s raised the possibility of an invasion by a continental power—particularly the expansionist French Second Empire of Napoléon III. While due consideration would undoubtedly be given to Belgium's southern frontier and Meuse basin, Antwerp took precedence because of the immediate access it provided to British troops via the Scheldt.

For the sceptics, it proved difficult to convince them that the country at large, and Brussels in particular, were not simply being abandoned for the benefit of the commercial centre alone. In the Chamber of Representatives in 1858, Barthélémi Dumortier, Catholic representative for Roulers, took

¹⁷ P.P.R., 16 January 1856.

¹⁸ MRA Fonds Fortifications, Antwerp 73/3-10, Report in the name of the Section Centrale by Mr. Goblet, 17 May 1856; H. A. Brialmont, *Réponse au pamphlet Anvers et M. Brialmont* (Guyot, Brussels, 1865), p. 21.

¹⁹ Ibid., Antwerp 73/3-7, Note on the question of the enlargement of Antwerp and on the provisions that might be made to satisfy current requirements, 1855; Brialmont, *Réponse*, p. 13.

²⁰ MRA Fonds Fortifications, Antwerp 73/3-7, Note on the military importance of Antwerp and the work it requires, 19 May 1852.

the opportunity to argue that Brussels ‘is the heart of the country, it is there that we must plant the flag of patriotism high and mighty, it is there that we must call on the entire population to the defence of our territory, of our independence’.²¹ Served by six railway lines connecting to outlying cities, Brussels, it was argued, was much better equipped to be the nation’s focal point than Antwerp, which only possessed a single operational line that was likely to become overloaded with men, materiel, and the transfer of public services during an invasion. Additionally, Antwerp’s greatest weakness was the requirement to hold both banks of the Scheldt in order to secure its resupply; a less than certain situation if the Netherlands were the enemy, and a problem with which Brussels did not have to contend.

It was one thing trying to convince sceptical politicians that the military strategists had settled on the correct, and most cost-effective option, but it was another entirely to persuade the public. On two counts—namely, its commercial activities and the cumbersome military servitudes imposed on proprietors in the vicinity of fortifications—the local population raised vehement protests against the Government’s plans. Since 1585, when the Dutch barred merchant vessels from entering the Scheldt to create a commercial monopoly at Amsterdam, Antwerp’s inhabitants had fought to regain their just position at the heart of European trade. The reopening of the Scheldt by the French in 1795 slowly changed the city’s fortunes to the point where, by 1815, prosperity had returned. With this, however, came a significant growth in population, which continued to overwhelm the old defences with ever-expanding suburbs ‘choking up’ the existing fortifications with approaches that were no longer clear for military use. Reporting on the development of the defensive works, two British officers accurately noted the conflicting state of affairs:

Already the city is too small for the wants of the commercial population, and in the course of another twenty years the disproportion will become unbearable. In considering therefore the future prospects of Antwerp as a fortress it must be borne in mind that the present line of defences cannot long be maintained.²²

²¹ P.P.R., 3 August 1858.

²² MRA Fonds Fortifications, Antwerp 73/3-12, Report upon the entrenched camp lately formed round Antwerp by Captain W. M. Dixon, Royal Artillery, and Captain R. M. Laffan, Royal Engineers, May 1854.

Clearly the wishes of the population did not complement the military requirements. This problem persisted for the remainder of the century.

The shackles of limited trade were completely removed from the port in 1863 after the Belgians bought out their neighbours' right to levy tolls on shipping entering the Scheldt estuary, the mouth of which had returned to Dutch hands in 1839. From this point on, the commercial metropolis continued to expand exponentially, creating trouble for the military authorities through the *Meetingers* who were intent on limiting the damaging impact of fortifications on trade.²³

Adhering to the policy of unifying force, Antwerp, with a few additions, such as a ring of outlying forts to protect its walls along with bridgeheads at Mechelen and Aarschot, was to provide the perfect point for the army to concentrate in safety. Given the uncertainty over what form an invasion might take, or where it would come from, it was difficult to set down a precise strategic plan to cover all eventualities, but it was fairly evident from the studies undertaken that Antwerp would play a central role.²⁴ Used as a base of operations, the army would theoretically be able to operate at great distances from the city itself, with pivots at the retained defences on the Meuse, and across the country. In true Jominian style, the army would benefit from secure lines of operations to engage at the decisive point—a factor that he felt the Austrians had lacked in their defence of Belgium in 1792.²⁵ Although the revered theorist had considered Brussels suitable for this role, Antwerp provided similar, if not greater, benefits. It solved the issue concerning the size of the army, and promised it an active role in the defence of the nation that satisfied desires to uphold neutrality through a show of arms. In one historian's view, the aggrandisement of Antwerp in 1859 was even 'an indication of growing nationalism'.²⁶

²³ H. Greefs, 'De Schelde geblokkeerd in 1839: hoe Antwerpen opnieuw een provinciestad werd', in M. Van Ginderachter et al. (eds.), *Het Land dat Nooit Was: Één Tegen-Freitelijk Geschiedenis van België* (De Bezig Bij Antwerpen, Antwerp, 2014), p. 77.

²⁴ MRA Fonds Fortifications, Antwerp 73/3-10, Report in the name of the Section Centrale by Mr. Goblet, 17 May 1856.

²⁵ Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (Routledge, London & New York, 1983), p. 62. For an overview of Jominian principles, see pp. 60–75; J. Shy, 'Jomini' in P. Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986), pp. 143–185.

²⁶ Thomas, *The Guarantee*, p. 393.

Proposals to enlarge the city by demolishing the old walls and reconstructing a larger enceinte, which would encompass the wider agglomeration of suburbs spreading to the north and east, was just one of many propositions to resolve the issue. Yet, any new fortified line would almost certainly impose further military servitudes on dwellers within the military zone, who had emigrated to the grounds beyond the walls out of necessity after 1830.²⁷ This had been permitted, wrongly in the eyes of many, because of the confidence placed in the Treaty of London, which had seemingly rendered fortifications and the laws governing military servitudes superfluous. Those representing the affected communities, naturally, did not share this opinion, and campaigned strongly against what they considered to be archaic and unjust obligations unwittingly imposed on the unsuspecting.²⁸ In a further demonstration of local power, violent meetings and petitions by the antimilitaristic population in 1862 saw them eventually win a minor victory against the servitudes imposed by the northern citadel. Their actions culminated in the final dismantling of the fortification in 1881, which had long been described as dangerous and an invitation for bombardment of a densely populated area within the old city walls.²⁹ Still, requests for general exemption were rejected on the grounds of setting a precedent that would need to be extended across the nation's other strongpoints.

The transformation of Antwerp into an entrenched camp was eventually sanctioned in 1859. It took the form of proposals submitted by 37-year-old Captain Henri-Alexis Brialmont, who would later become Belgium's preeminent engineer and military authority.³⁰ The audacity of his ideas had initially landed him a sojourn in a provincial backwater, but support from Chazal and other senior officers paved the way for a return

²⁷ The law of 1791 and the Royal Decree of 1815 were still in force during the 1850s; see also MRA Fonds Fortifications, Antwerp 73/3–12, Note on the question of the enlargement of Antwerp and on the provisions that might be made to satisfy current requirements, 1855.

²⁸ P.P.R., 7 December 1852 and 7 December 1853.

²⁹ *La Belgique Militaire*, 27 March 1887, p. 402.

³⁰ Col. De Lannoy, 'Le Roi Léopold 1er et la Défense Nationale: l'organisation de l'armée et la question des fortifications d'Anvers', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1981), pp. 145–147. Henri Alexis Brialmont (25 May 1821–21 July 1903) graduated from the *École Militaire* in 1843, and served as private secretary to Minister of War, Félix Chazal in 1847–1850. Promoted to Lieutenant-General in 1877, and he was Inspector General of the Army until his retirement in 1892.

to oversee proceedings. First and foremost, acceptance for the project lay in the demolition of the old walls to provide more space for the city's commercial activities. This agreed, a new line of defensive works encompassing the suburbs of Berchem, Borgerhout, and Saint Laurent were begun.

Brialmont's *coup de grace* was the construction of eight polygonal forts, the design of which had been inspired from observations made while touring Prussia. After their completion between 1864 and 1868, many foreign observers deemed them, and the fortress as a whole, as among the best examples of its design.³¹ Spaced between one and two kilometres apart at approximately four kilometres from the city proper, these forts provided ample space in which a defensive force could manoeuvre. This was of vital importance in the defence of the city because there were no defensive works of note in these intervals. Despite recriminations, Brialmont believed that this was necessary in order to maintain the concentration of forces at the vital points.³² Infantry and mobile artillery were to be as much a part of the defensive structure as the fitted guns in the fortifications. Having an allocated force of upwards of 40,000 men for this task, it was clear that the 1859 Commission, which settled on this proposal, was committed to the idea of a concentration of forces that would see the modest field army operate within a safe distance of its supporting bodies at Antwerp. The bridgeheads on the Meuse were to provide delaying actions, certainly, but independence was to be retained under Antwerp's new defensive installations that could provide cover long enough to welcome a relieving force.

No sooner had Belgium's defensive jewel been completed—to the acclaim of Europe—than advances in rifled artillery outpaced the effectiveness of its design. The devastating firepower of Prussian artillery during the siege of Paris in 1870–1871 against fortifications built within the last 30 years was cause enough for concern. High-calibre guns obliterated the capital's outer forts with consummate ease in a matter of hours. Perhaps even more worrying though was the distance from which these pieces could now be deployed, firing shells beyond what had been considered the safe zone and into the city itself.³³ Both developments brought the utility

³¹ Brialmont, *Réponse*, pp. 23–24.

³² C. Faque, *Henri-Alexis Brialmont: Les Forts de la Meuse 1887–1891* (Les Amis de la Citadelle de Namur, Namur, 1988), pp. 16 and 29.

³³ G. Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870–1871* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003), pp. 281–284; R. Tombs, 'The wars against Paris', in S. Förster and J. Nagler (eds.), *On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War*

of Brialmont's Antwerp fortifications into serious doubt. Questions concerning the population's safety were interspersed with discussions of a strategic nature that examined whether the national redoubt still afforded the army enough protection to concentrate, and from which to operate, in the event of an invasion.

After so much deliberation, expense, and reorganisation, Antwerp had to remain the crux of Belgium's military strategy, which itself remained wedded to the idea of minimizing the dispersal of forces across its territory. To do otherwise was to undermine the faith placed in the 1859 Commission that had so painstakingly singled out a handful of outlying strongpoints that might serve the army as bridgeheads or pivots of manoeuvre in the event of an invasion. Indeed, further reductions by Charles Rogier's Liberal Government in 1861 had seen the works at Charleroi and the citadel at Ghent demolished in a bid to further concentrate forces. Even after the Franco-Prussian War, in 1873 the Catholic Government under Barthélémy de Theux de Meylandt decided to take this even further by decommissioning the fort at Oostende and the citadel at Tournai.³⁴ Not surprisingly, Antwerp itself required major revisions befitting its continued role at the heart of national defence. These took the form of modifications to existing works and new constructions between eight and 15 kilometres from the city centre. Dendermonde, Rupelmonde, Waelhem, Lier, Steendorp, and Schooten underwent work between 1878 and 1885, while four redoubts and a series of smaller positions were added between 1883 and 1893.

Notwithstanding these additions that went some way to restoring Antwerp's defensive capabilities, the momentous change in the geopolitical situation of Europe following the newly unified German Empire's acquisition of Alsace-Lorraine, significantly altered the type of invasion likely to confront Belgium. The 1859 Commission's idea of a direct invasion seeking to conquer had become improbable as the juggernauts of France and Germany sought to attack one another via Belgium's lightly defended Meuse valley. It was conceivable that a transitory invasion through the southeastern corner of the country might not even force either belligerent to bother about the Belgian army or the state of the

and the German Wars of Unification, 1861–1871 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997), pp. 541–545.

³⁴ *Belgique Militaire*, 27 March 1887, p. 414.

defences at its national redoubt. This resulted in an immediate shift of focus away from Antwerp and towards the outlying posts at Liège and Namur.

With France's loss of Alsace-Lorraine, the prospects of a lasting peace in Europe appeared increasingly unlikely. The result, for Belgium, was the further likelihood of somehow being dragged into a Franco-German conflict in the future, which it had so narrowly avoided in 1870–1871. Advocates of a lightly armed neutrality had hailed this fact as confirmation that international law would continue to guarantee Belgium's independence, which in turn would allow the Government to return to its primary function of developing social and commercial prosperity rather than wasting time on costly military reorganisation. Still, France's decision not to fortify its border with Belgium was, as David Stevenson notes, so 'striking as to raise the possibility that it was deliberate'; it almost encouraged future German aggression across Belgian, as opposed to French, soil.³⁵ The Meuse corridor offered the route of least resistance for attacks aimed at the Rhineland or Paris, especially given the relative lack of attention given to its fortifications while Antwerp was under construction. The citadels of Liège and Namur offered cursory protection to the cities' inhabitants, who came to see them as targets that would invite bombardment, while the strategically important points of Visé and Huy were far from satisfactorily equipped.

It became obvious that the Meuse, therefore, would play a significant role in the event of a future war. Bismarck was vociferous in urging Belgium to adopt stronger defensive measures in fortifications and manpower in order to deter French aggression.³⁶ Many high-ranking Belgian officers were in agreement and saw it as an obligation to uphold the country's neutrality lest one Great Power take advantage of its weakness to gain a victory over the other. Successive Ministers of War, for example, were very vocal on this point and attempted to highlight the strategic importance of the area. General Bruno Renard, Minister of War from 1868 to 1870 and again from 1878 to 1879, noted:

The Meuse will play a great role if a war takes place in our territory; whether we have to defend ourselves alone against an invasion, or whether the belligerent powers choose our country as their battlefield, the Meuse, I repeat,

³⁵ Stevenson, 'Fortifications', p. 845.

³⁶ Thomas, *The Guarantee*, pp. 398–399.

will exercise a great influence on operations and will prove a great aid to the one who controls it.³⁷

General Henri Guillaume, Minister of War from 1870 to 1873, similarly expressed concerns that Alsace-Lorraine might provide a launch pad for a future invasion, with the key to its success, the mastery of the river Meuse.³⁸ Finally, General Jean-Baptiste Liagre, Minister of War from 1879 to 1880, emphasised in a speech on 9 April 1880:

The Meuse valley [...] has become the line of operation for belligerent armies in the event of a war between Germany and France. Should Germany attack France, it would behove them to cross the Meuse at Liège or Namur in order to invade France from the north. Reciprocally, should France attack Germany, it would be of great strategic interest to cross the Meuse at either point, in its search to penetrate into Germany via the lower Rhine.³⁹

Yet, despite this public airing of concern, it took more than a decade before the first draft plans for a redevelopment of the Meuse fortifications were commissioned by the Liberal Ministry of Walthère Frère-Orban in 1882.

Preliminary planning was entrusted to Brialmont, who had also been outspoken in his support of fortifying the Meuse. Through his numerous publications, newspaper articles, and public speeches, the ageing military engineer spearheaded the army's campaign to intertwine the seemingly obvious necessity to improve the nation's physical defences with the unpopular measure of introducing personal service. In one such publication, Brialmont wrote:

In order for Germany to not have a great incentive to violate Belgian neutrality, we would need to be able to oppose an invading army with a resistance that would oblige it to slow its march and to make a considerable detachment in order to secure its line of operations. This result can be obtained if, after having furnished our fortresses with good troops, we are still able to put into the field a well-organised army of 70,000 men, and if the positions of Liège and Namur, which the invaders will need in order to make the Meuse valley a line of supply and evacuation, are only able to be

³⁷ H. A. Brialmont, *Situation Militaire de la Belgique: Travaux de défense de la Meuse* (C. Muquardt, Brussels, 1882), p. 195.

³⁸ *La Meuse*, 19 April 1880.

³⁹ Brialmont, *Situation Militaire*, p. 195.

taken by a regular siege. In this situation, the German army would have to fight, independently of our active forces, the French corps which, at the very moment of the invasion of Belgium, will have moved towards Namur via Givet and Maubeuge, as well as having to mask Antwerp to protect its lines of operation, we can be sure that Belgian neutrality will be respected.⁴⁰

Naturally, similar principles applied to a French invasion. Nevertheless, the political climate facing the Meuse proposals of the 1880s was very different from that during the 1850s' debates over Antwerp. Military policy had become a voting issue of the highest, and most contentious, order, and neither Liberals nor Catholics could lightly commit to such costly measures without risking political capital.

As early as 1880, before any formal examinations had been made concerning the fortification of the Meuse, partisan reporting was moulding public opinion. The clerical press, in particular, was accused of spreading rumours that construction of 22 forts had been sanctioned by the Liberal Government that would, in effect, turn Liège and Namur into entrenched camps like Antwerp.⁴¹ This was, of course, a complete fabrication, but it did allow them to draw focus away from the troublesome school laws and onto the Liberals' apparent thirst for military expenditure, which in the run-up to the election was likely to turn voters towards Catholic frugality. A change in the international situation during the 1880s, however, compelled the country to urgently revisit the issue.

When the Catholic Ministry under the moderate Auguste Beernaert took the decision to invite Brialmont to undertake a further study of the Meuse fortifications on 31 December 1886, it was in the hope of presenting something to the Chamber of Representatives before the recess. King Leopold II was particularly anxious to see the plans drawn up and the process to begin as quickly as possible because of his shared ambitions with high-ranking officers to see Belgium's military capacity increased.⁴² Having already studied the question in 1882, and been consistently at the forefront of the wealth of publications dealing with Belgian strategy and military affairs, Brialmont was able to produce a report by 15 January 1887, which was duly presented to the nation.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 185.

⁴¹ *La Meuse*, 21 May 1880.

⁴² G. Schallich, 'Quelques chiffres concernant le coût des forts "Brialmont" de Liège et de Namur', *Bulletin d'Information du Centre Liégeois d'Histoire et d'Archeologie Militaires*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1986), p. 35.

The fortifications were to follow similar principles to those employed at Antwerp—namely, two rings of independent forts at between seven and nine kilometres from the city centres of Liège and Namur. Overlooking 18 of the 26 river crossings along the Meuse, these two cities held the strategic key to the valley's control. The former was to receive 12 forts at intervals of approximately five kilometres (six large and six smaller *fortins*), while the latter was initially to receive seven forts and the retention of its citadel. By 1 February, however, it was decided to abandon the citadel and construct four large and five small forts, identical to those at Liège.⁴³ Whereas this signalled progress on the military question, it amounted to little once the decision was made to leave Visé and Huy unaltered.

The construction of these forts was projected to cost approximately ₣24,000,000, although the 'torpedo shell crisis' required a change of design that increased expenditure by a further ₣30,000,000. Interpretation of French artillery tests at Malmaison in the summer of 1886 had shown that delayed-action fuses in steel shells carrying melinite explosive could demolish standard masonry within hours.⁴⁴ To counter this, each fort was to be built using revolutionary methods that saw concrete poured into a single-cased mould, 2.5 metres thick. An additional three metres of earthworks were to cover these structures so that they could withstand the heaviest siege artillery of the day—namely, 210 mm and 220 mm guns. Difficulties with the capabilities of machinery and adequate illumination, however, forced construction to be suspended at night. This meant that the unreinforced concrete could not be poured continuously, resulting in inadequately bound layers that weakened the overall structure. The Germans, who used the Meuse forts as a basis for the construction at Molsheim in 1890, and the French, who were to use the same methods a few years later, overcame these difficulties with far greater success.⁴⁵ Although not an issue for the Meuse forts at the time of completion in 1891, these weaknesses were to be exposed in the opening weeks of the First World War by 305 mm and 420 mm howitzers. These guns were able to generate a force of more than 3,600 metric tons worth of energy on

⁴³ Ibid., p. 36; *La Meuse*, 14 and 28 February 1887; *l'Indépendance Belge*, 18 February 1887.

⁴⁴ Stevenson, 'Fortifications', p. 831; Schallich, 'Quelques chiffres', p. 36.

⁴⁵ For a detailed description of the technical aspects of the Meuse forts and their construction, see Faque, *Henri-Alexis Brialmont*, pp. 33–40; Kauffman and Kauffman, *Forts & Fortifications*, pp. 85–90.

impact, while the fortifications were built to withstand just 240 metric tons of energy dissipated from an 1887 210 mm shell.⁴⁶

In their armaments, too, the Meuse forts appeared to answer the requirements of the day. Between them, they housed 171 cupolas with a variety of medium and heavy guns. These had been fitted at a further expense of £24,210,775 (£3,000,000 of this for their tests, transportation, and installation). These could have been obtained at a lower cost, as the German firm Gruson (later taken over by Krupp) had quoted the Belgians a price of £17,409,378 if granted exclusivity. Nevertheless, pressure from rival French firms, and particularly Belgian industry, compelled the Government to split the contract between the three nations, despite the additional costs, on the condition that both German and French factories associated themselves with their Belgian counterparts, providing them with the technology and expertise that they lacked.⁴⁷ This decision was made to appease the competing firms but also to support Belgium's own arms industry, largely based around Liège. The arms companies had for a long time provided the army with small arms, ammunition, and a few artillery pieces, but they had been unable to expand because of technical and financial limitations.⁴⁸

For all intents and purposes, the £71,600,000 spent on the Meuse fortresses between 1887 and 1891 seemed to have created the solid defensive barrier called for. It appeared to offer this guarantee from the outset in 1887. Yet, no sooner had the Beernaert Ministry taken the decision to push ahead with the Liège fortifications than the Liberal opposition seemingly changed tack and rallied support from local inhabitants against proposals that they had previously championed. The political face of Belgium's fortress policy had blatantly reared its ugly head once more. Frère-Orban took the opportunity to attack the Government's policy by suggesting that it had been forced on the nation through its late introduction to the Chamber of Representatives, and that Beernaert had performed an incredible *volte-face* given his well-documented comments under the Jules Malou Government that there would be no more military

⁴⁶ L. De Vos, *La Première Guerre Mondiale* (J. M. Collet, Braine-l'Alleud, 1997), p. 30.

⁴⁷ Schallich, 'Quelques chiffres', p. 38.

⁴⁸ For more on Belgium's arms industry, see P. Leonard, 'Le Manufacture d'Armes de l'État (M.A.E.)', *Bulletin d'Information du Centre Liégeois d'Histoire et d'Archeologie Militaires*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1986), pp. 5–24; J. Herlant, 'De Fonderie Royale de Canons, industrielle pijler voorde uitrusting van de Belgische Defensie tussen 1830 en 1870. Historische en technologische analyse', *Cahiers belges d'histoire militaire*, vol. 3 (2005), pp. 99–197.

charges. 'He has misled the country and exploited, before the voters, the question of national defence' was the accusation levelled at Beernaert by his political opponent. It was one that, in the context of Catholic policy throughout the mid-nineteenth century, was not too much of an exaggeration.⁴⁹

Frère-Orban's assault continued with vehement protestations against the fortifications themselves, terming them 'useless, ineffectual, and dangerous'. They were useless because an invading army could cross the Meuse at Maastricht or Maeseyck and advance either via Hasselt or Landen, or even by Aix-la-Chapelle towards the lower Rhine to get to France. In other words, they could be turned. They were deemed ineffectual because there were not enough troops to defend them properly, allowing the enemy to take them easily. Finally, they were seen as dangerous because a ring of 12 forts, in the case of Liège, with the city at its centre, constituted a retrenched camp that would draw an invading army towards it.⁵⁰ The Liberal press was quick to seize on this theme and wrote such things as, 'Liège is about to share with Antwerp the honour and the danger in serving as the rampart of Belgian nationality', all the while demonstrating its geographically exposed nature that placed it well within range of a German *coup de main*.⁵¹ *La Gazette de Liège* published a series of 14 articles personally criticizing Brialmont; in them they wrongly accused him of transforming Namur and Liège into entrenched camps that would invite attack.⁵² As will be demonstrated later, this was not at all the case. The Meuse fortifications were merely to act as bridgeheads and pivots for the field army, but such a rationale became worryingly absent from the Liberal onslaught. Brialmont felt obliged to respond on numerous occasions to defend his position, concluding in one instance: 'The future will avenge these reckless accusations; it will show on which side political prudence and military sense actually were'.⁵³

Of course, this might also be seen as an extraordinary contradiction on the part of Frère-Orban, given his personal involvement in asking Brialmont to draw up preliminary plans in 1882. Still, the Liberal leader

⁴⁹ *l'Indépendance Belge*, 19 February 1887.

⁵⁰ *Belgique Militaire*, 27 March 1887, p. 402, and 22 May 1887, p. 659; *La Meuse*, 13 March 1888.

⁵¹ *La Meuse*, 10 February 1887.

⁵² *Belgique Militaire*, 13 March 1887, pp. 340–343, and 27 March 1887, pp. 402–410.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 8 May 1887, p. 612.

cared little and was not about to spurn an opportunity to sow seeds of division among the Catholic ranks. He was, after all, a Liège man himself and understood the concerns of the population, which would rather have seen an increase to the army than the restrictions imposed by the fortifications. Indeed, Beernaert faced a wall of opposition from within his own party; it balked at the idea of committing to further military expenditures of this magnitude. The Church, the clerical press, and the Catholic associations all rallied around the phrase ‘not one man, not one penny more’.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suggest that Catholic military expenditures ceased completely. In addition to the cost of the Meuse fortifications, the party spent F19,573,000 on improvements to Antwerp and improvements to the artillery between 1884 and 1890.⁵⁴ The Premier, who had failed to introduce conscription in 1886, attempted to turn his personal defeat into victory by suggesting that the fortifications would act as a shield against the introduction of personal service. In reality, the new defences would require an increase in the establishment to make them effective.⁵⁵ Eventually, enough cross-party support was obtained in this ‘national question of the first order’ to see the Bill passed through the Chamber of Representatives by a majority of 40 votes in June 1887 despite Frère-Orban’s attempt to turn it into a political issue. The Senate followed suit later that month with 42 votes in favour, nine against and nine abstentions.

Strategically, it changed little in spite of accusations to the contrary. The 1859 plan for the concentration of forces had always envisaged the use of the Meuse as a fulcrum on which the field army might operate, and the new fortifications at Liège and Namur merely reinforced this possibility. Brialmont remained adamant that these points remained nothing more than bridgeheads that would allow the army to control both banks of the river, allowing it to operate on the ground of its choosing.⁵⁶ As Jomini had once said, ‘whoever is master of the Meuse is the master of Belgium’.⁵⁷ Certainly there was a greater emphasis on delaying an advancing army along this corridor than had previously been envisioned, but Antwerp had not lost its importance. The principle of concentrating forces was retained,

⁵⁴ Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, p. 176.

⁵⁵ *La Meuse*, 24 February 1887.

⁵⁶ *Belgique Militaire*, 13 March 1887, pp. 341–343, and 27 March 1887, pp. 409–410 and 420.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 19 September 1886, p. 360.

and the possibility of the army retreating to the national redoubt, after having delayed an invading force in its transitory move across southern Belgium, similarly endured.

Although it remained a primary concern that such a retreat would be occasioned prematurely because of a lack of men, it was argued that the reduction in garrisons from the decommissioned forts since 1859 had partially made up for the increased force needed to hold the Meuse without interfering with the strength of the field army. Indeed, this had released some 12,419 men and 584 guns that had previously not been considered. When the 8,800 men of the old Meuse garrison were added to this figure, it was shown that a force of approximately 21,200 men was available to hold the new forts, without altering the size of the army prescribed by the 1859 Commission. Of course, the modifications to Antwerp since its completion in 1864 necessitated a further 5,000, but this was more than compensated for by the increase in the annual contingent from 12,000 to 13,300.⁵⁸ As an article in *La Belgique Militaire* concluded, this was ‘not the abandonment of the system of concentration, but indeed the reinforcement of this system, not the dissemination of active forces, but rather a better use of these forces’.⁵⁹ This was only partly true. As Brialmont, other senior figures, and foreign observers continued to note, Belgium still lacked a force strong enough to act as an effective deterrent to the conscript armies likely to face it. Only the introduction of personal service in its own forces would truly allow the Belgian Army to meaningfully carry out its strategic plans. Yet, it was not until the European crises at the start of the twentieth century that changes to this end were undertaken.

The First Moroccan Crisis of 1905 reawakened Europe to the possibility of a future conflict between its main powers. For Belgium, it inspired a move to examine the state of its armed forces and fortifications, which had once again been relegated to a secondary importance behind the social issues of the day: universal male suffrage and electoral reform. A succession of Catholic governments, since 1884, had pursued a largely frugal policy towards the army, and reduced its effective strength to a bare minimum through a failed scheme of voluntary enlistment since 1902.⁶⁰ Repeated efforts to introduce conscription had been rejected out of hand

⁵⁸ Ibid., 27 March 1887, p. 415.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 422.

⁶⁰ For more detail on this, see Chap. 4.

by the antimilitaristic majority, while the army's equipment (especially the artillery) and fortresses had once again fallen into obsolescence. Military budgets across Europe were being stretched as nations attempted to keep pace with one another through the development of their navies and the introduction of quick-firing field guns. Although Belgium did not partake in the former, reluctant spending on artillery was eventually undertaken. This left little desire to update its fortifications despite the siege of Port Arthur in 1904 demonstrating that these structures might still play a valuable role in modern warfare.⁶¹ On inspection, Antwerp's dated fortifications appeared lacking, and unlikely to fulfil the role a future war might ask it to play. As such, what little money could be generated from the majority Catholic Chamber of Representatives was put to use on the national redoubt, despite such measures proving of limited use without sufficient numbers in the field army to support it.

Notwithstanding the continued opposition from the traditional antimilitaristic milieu, the second Catholic Ministry of Paul de Smet de Naeyer undertook what they believed to be a national obligation to expand the Antwerp fortifications in 1906. The latest improvements to Antwerp remained incomplete, with 32 kilometres worth of its 72-kilometre perimeter lacking permanent defences.⁶² The initial Government project envisioned the construction of 13 forts, four *fortins*, and 14 intermediary redoubts that would significantly expand the radius of the entrenched camp, with a further four forts at Dendermonde, considered as an annexe. Forts 1 to 8 of Antwerp's 1859 project were to be updated and converted into a continuous belt of defences. Once constructed, both Antwerp and Dendermonde were to be cleared of their old walls.⁶³ This was particularly welcomed by the local population, who despite their aversion to military spending, was keen to obtain further territorial concessions that would allow an increase to the port's commercial capacity. Indeed, the development of deep-water quays was seen as essential to attracting large vessels back to Antwerp, which, in recent years, had taken their trade to the likes of Hamburg, Rotterdam, and Dunkirk.⁶⁴ The removal of some older defences would provide the space on which to

⁶¹ Stevenson, 'Fortifications', p. 831.

⁶² Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, p. 236.

⁶³ *Belgique Militaire*, 4 February 1906, pp. 105–106.

⁶⁴ *Courrier de l'Escaut*, 26 January 1906.

build, but the Government was adamant that the largely undesirable new fortifications were a necessary outcome. Providing that they were built at a sufficient distance from the city to allow for future expansion and to ensure that the outlying suburbs were not cut off, this was an acceptable solution for the commercial centre.⁶⁵

For their largely Catholic and antimilitaristic representatives, it remained a difficult prospect to accept. The rhetoric emanating from the party leadership since the construction of the Meuse forts had detailed strict limits to military expenditure, and this project, they feared, would leave the electorate feeling betrayed. Only after a series of modifications to the initial plans, which limited the potential costs and demands on manpower, was the Right finally mollified and coerced into dropping its joint opposition with the Liberals who had, once again, seen a political opportunity to exploit. These included the decision to declassify the bridgehead at Dendermonde in favour of a more lightly garrisoned strongpoint on the Ruppel; guarantees that the projected constructions on the left bank of the Scheldt were to be abandoned; and a demonstration that much of the cost was to be compensated for by the sale of land on which the soon-to-be demolished old fortifications stood. The Minister of War, Alexandre Cousebant d'Alkemade, was accused by some quarters of having capitulated to the qualms of local residents and the antimilitarists in accepting these modifications, but he maintained that the decision was fully justifiable in military terms.⁶⁶

Indeed, the eventual F46,600,000 passed by the Chamber of Representatives still allowed for a sizeable redevelopment of Antwerp's defensive system. It was to receive another ring of 23 forts and *fortins* at a distance of 15 to 20 kilometres from the city centre. Once constructed, the perimeter measured an astonishing 110 kilometres. This was second in size only to Paris' defences, which spanned 125 kilometres in circumference.⁶⁷ Yet the question remained over who was going to man it. Cousebant d'Alkemade had declared in 1905 that the entirety of the field army would be required to participate in Antwerp's defence until the fortification process was complete.

⁶⁵ MRA Fonds Moscou 5029, 1906 Commission into the Second Line of Defence at Antwerp, 25 June 1906–26 January 1907, 2nd Meeting, 4 July 1906.

⁶⁶ *Belgique Militaire*, 18 March 1906.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 4 February 1906, p. 106. Other figures suggest that the perimeter was no more than 95 kilometres in length; see Stevenson, 'Fortifications', p. 847.

Coupled with the 15,400 men already designated to the defence of Liège and another 13,400 to Namur, a total figure of 180,000 men was proposed at a time when the voluntary system was struggling to maintain the peacetime strength of 42,800.⁶⁸ Senior officers had clearly hoped that an increase in the capacity of Antwerp's defences would engender a move towards personal service. The campaign for its introduction had not weakened since the passing of its most vocal advocate, Brialmont, in 1903. If anything, its proponents, much like those in Britain's own National Service League, became increasingly active when confronted by rising European tensions with an inadequate voluntary force.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the Government was adamant that it should retain some favour among its supporters, and it argued that an increase to the establishment was unnecessary. Two new inundation zones and faith in the reorganised fortress forces saw to that.⁷⁰

The newest dissenting voice was that of Georges Eugène Victor Ducarne, Chief of the General Staff from 1905 to 1910, whose many publications and speeches during this period spearheaded the drive for compulsion. He argued that Belgium ought to have had an army four times the size of its current establishment if the usual proportion of 10% of a nation's population typically joined the colours as they did elsewhere.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, p. 237.

⁶⁹ For more on the National Service League in Great Britain, see I.F.W. Beckett, 'The nation in arms, 1914–18', in I.F.W. Beckett and K. Simpson (eds.), *A Nation in Arms: A Social Study of the British Army in the First World War* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1985), pp. 4–6; T. Bowman and M. Connelly, *The Edwardian Army* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012), pp. 47–48 and 159–162.

⁷⁰ *Belgique Militaire*, 18 March 1906. Prior to 1902, the fortress artillery at Antwerp, Liège, Namur, Dendermonde, Diest, and Huy was split into 58 active and seven reserve batteries, along with three special companies. After the 1902 reorganisation, it was increased to 50 active and 27 reserve batteries. Similarly, the infantry had consisted of the 13th and 14th Line Infantry Regiments (each comprised of three active and two reserve battalions), the three reserve battalions of the Regiment of Carabiniers, and the 32 reserve battalions of the remaining infantry regiments. This totalled six active and 39 reserve battalions, prior to 1902. After this date, the 13th and 14th Line Infantry Regiments retained their association with the fortress, albeit now formed of three active, one reserve, and two fortress battalions. They were joined by the 35 newly formed fortress battalions of the remaining infantry regiments. See *Exposé 1902, Tome I*, p. 451; L. A. Lecleir, *L'Infanterie: Filiations et Traditions* (Service de l'histoire des Forces armées belges, Brussels, 1973), p. 65.

⁷¹ V. Ducarne, *Supplément au Bulletin de la Défense National de Janvier 1911: Conférence donnée le 29 novembre 1911 à la Conférence du Jeune Barreau par le Lieutenant general Ducarne: La question militaire en Belgique* (Brussels, 1911), p. 15.

In 1911 he published a series of articles entitled 'Are We Ready?' ('*Sommes-nous Prêts?*') in *Le Soir*, which caused many to take note of the deficiencies in the nation's defence.⁷² Certainly, the recruitment debacle had been partly resolved by the introduction of the 1909, one-son per family law. Nevertheless, it would not be until May 1913 that universal conscription would see the army attempt to obtain a short-service field force of 340,000 men by 1925. This ought only to be viewed as a partial success, as was clearly the case among foreign observers whose interest in Belgian preparedness and strategic policy increased in the decade preceding the outbreak of war.

A succession of French military attachés to Brussels, for example, reported on an almost daily basis to the Quai d'Orsay on all aspects of Belgian military developments. Captain Louis-Marie-Eugène-Victor Duruy, in the role from 1909 until 1911, was particularly concerned over the state of the Antwerp defences, the supporting field army, and the seemingly Germanophile sympathies of senior officers. He noted in November 1910, following a conversation with Lieutenant-General Docteur, who was overseeing the construction of the new Antwerp forts, that delays of over a year were to be expected because of indecision concerning the maritime installations. This had meant that only two forts on the lower Scheldt had been started, and completion was not projected before 1913 or 1914.⁷³ This, along with financial complications, accounted for the difficulties faced in arming the new forts. Indeed, the four Saint-Chammond 240-mm pieces delivered to Lillo and Berendrecht on the right bank of the Scheldt were only furnished with a single round each.⁷⁴ More concerning, was the fact that the fortifications in which the eight 280-mm Krupp guns were due to be mounted remained uncompleted at the time of delivery, forcing the German company to keep them in storage until the outbreak of war, after which they were, rather ironically, used against the Belgians on the Yser.⁷⁵ Budgetary problems extended to the field army, too. It lacked hundreds of officers, the cavalry was 6,000 horses short of

⁷² *Le Soir*, 31 August, 1–3, 21 September, and 29 November 1911.

⁷³ SHD 7 N 1156, Report by Duruy, 20 November 1910.

⁷⁴ Ibid., Report by Duruy 4 January 1912; A. Duchesne, 'Appréciations françaises sur la valeur de l'armée belge et les perspectives de guerre de 1871 à 1914', *Carnet de la Fourragère*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1961), p. 196.

⁷⁵ J. Wullus-Rudiger, *La Belgique et l'Équilibre Européen* (Berger-Levrault, Paris, 1935), p. 67.

establishment, it had no machine guns (the 40 in Belgian service in 1909 were being installed in the fortresses, which required 300), and by 1911 it was short of 30,000,000 rounds of ammunition.⁷⁶

Due to a lack of confidence that resulted from Belgium's unpreparedness, foreign observers paid close attention to the strategic planning that accompanied its fortress redevelopments. Duruy reported on the conflicting viewpoints that were emanating from all quarters of the officer corps that had a direct impact on France's own preparations. For example, in 1900 Ducarne presented two papers concerning Belgium's international obligations and the strength of the army. He noted that in the event of a German invasion, the Belgian Army's role could be defined as: 'taking up a waiting position, as soon as possible, on the flank of the German army corps' movements, so as to interrupt the march of their columns, force them to halt and await our shock, or to bring them to attack us in positions known to us'. Ducarne continued by stating that it was not just a matter of sitting on the defensive but to attack in order to demonstrate strength and impartiality. This might see the army conduct operations as far as Neufchâteau, or five days' march from the Meuse to search out the right wing of the enemy. This he upheld in an anonymous article in *La Belgique Militaire* in 1906, where Ducarne continued to demonstrate an offensive spirit. He was confident that the Belgian Army could mobilise and concentrate quicker than its enemies and afford it enough time to select the ground on which to operate.⁷⁷

Others, such as General Déjardin, expressed the complete opposite view. He argued that venturing as far as Arlon, deep in the province of Luxembourg, was imprudent, rather preferring to hold a defensive line on the left bank of the Meuse between Liège and Namur.⁷⁸ There had been vague suggestions of establishing an entrenched camp at Libramont to cover this route, or at least to increase the numbers of *Chasseurs Ardennais* to patrol the area.⁷⁹ The general consensus among the majority of officers, however, was that the army ought to secure itself behind the Meuse and await developments. This would offer it the freedom of action to operate in relative safety, await foreign support, or retreat to Antwerp.

⁷⁶ Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, p. 236.

⁷⁷ SHD 7 N 1156, Report by Duruy, 9 November 1909.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ SHD, 7 N 1159, Report by Génie, 18 January 1914.

The latter was seen as the most likely outcome albeit few wished to admit it. Among the few dissenting voices was that of the Socialist leader Émile Vandervelde who was quoted as saying: 'The Belgian army? But it would look on from Antwerp. It would react like the African natives who watch the troops opposing them, but who, at the same time, have an eye on the scrubland in which they would throw themselves like rabbits'.⁸⁰ This rather summed up what the rest of Europe feared.

Part of the problem lay in the uncertainty emanating from the top of the military establishment. In 1910, Lieutenant-Colonel Baron de Ryckel proposed to abolish the old *Direction Supérieure de la Guerre* under ministerial control and create a General Staff for the army. The Cabinet could still make war, but the army was to prepare for, and conduct, its operations. A Royal Decree of 26 June 1910 brought it into being and placed at its head Lieutenant-General Harry Jungbluth—King Albert's personal friend, confidant, and tutor. Nevertheless, Hellebaut, as Minister of War, was still able to exert unwarranted influence. Jungbluth's solution in 1911 was to create the *Conseil Supérieur de la Défense Nationale* to be presided over by the King, allowing the General Staff the opportunity to express their views in a more amenable environment. Despite being invited to sit on the council, Hellebaut was furious at the prospect of being relegated to a mere administrator and at a situation that might expose the Monarch to unwarranted scrutiny.⁸¹ There followed an impasse, during which time the Ministry of War attempted, unsuccessfully, to bring the General Staff of the army under its control through a reduction of its powers. Unable to gain support from his Cabinet colleagues, and under attack from all quarters for having blunted conscription in 1909, Hellebaut tendered his resignation in February 1912. The Premier, Charles de Broqueville, stepped in on a temporary basis, handing over several responsibilities to the General Staff, before taking over the Ministry of War.

Among the elements inherited, the General Staff took over responsibility for the army's organisation, training, mobilisation, supply, manoeuvres, materiel, and operations. It was not to act as the mouthpiece of the King but was to act in confidence under Albert's stewardship, while the final decision remained in civilian hands. By creating an Advisory Council, de Broqueville ensured that the General Staff's powers would be curbed by

⁸⁰ Ibid., 1156, Report by Drury, 9 November 1909.

⁸¹ Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, pp. 247–248.

the input of the Inspectors General, the Secretary General of the Ministry of War, the Chief Intendant, as well as representative generals from the infantry and cavalry. The new Minister of War, Lieutenant-General Michel, made further attempts to regain some control in May 1912 by denying the Chief of the General Staff direct access to the Ministry and the army. Sensing that it would be more prudent to have a civilian take the war portfolio, de Broqueville reclaimed the post permanently alongside his duties as Premier at the end of 1912.⁸²

Under already trying circumstances, the development of a sound strategic plan of operations was further hampered by the constant change of personnel. Jungbluth, who was 63 when he inherited the post of Chief of the General Staff in 1910, was the first of four men to undertake the role before the outbreak of the First World War. The retirement age of 65 was extremely disruptive and did not escape scrutiny from the press, who questioned the appointment of De Selliers de Moranville in 1914. He was within three years of the compulsory age of retirement and had just followed predecessors who themselves had managed at most two years before moving on. It was, as *La Chronique* noted, 'in spite of the post's importance, we appear to consider it, here at home, as merely an honourable end to a career'.⁸³ In light of the revered German model under the successful leadership of Moltke during the nineteenth century, this problem seemed all the more flagrant. The consequences were potentially devastating.

Jungbluth requested that de Ryckel prepare a paper on his theories abandoning central mobilisation in favour of mobilising forces in their garrisons before concentrating them at Liège, Namur, or Ath depending on the threat. It sought to examine a recent appreciation within the Belgian officer corps of the French 'cult of the offensive' doctrine, following the 1911 manoeuvres, which would see the army adopt a much more aggressive approach on the frontiers.⁸⁴

⁸² Ibid., pp. 249–250.

⁸³ *La Chronique*, 20 May 1914.

⁸⁴ SHD 7 N 1156, Report by Duruy, 9 November 1909; 7 N 1157, Report by Drury 19 January 1912. For more on the French 'cult of the offensive', see D. Porch, 'The French Army and the Spirit of the Offensive, 1900–14' in B. Bond and I. Roy (eds.), *War and Society: A Yearbook of Military History* (Croom Helm, London, 1975), pp. 117–143; A. J. Echevarria, 'The Cult of the Offensive Revisited: Confronting Technological Change before the Great War', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2002), pp. 199–214.

Despite finding favour at the Palace in 1911, through the person of the King's advisor Captain-Commandant Émile Galet, whose own ideas, though more defensive in nature also advocated fighting on the frontiers, these plans were completely discarded by successive Chiefs of the General Staff after 1912.⁸⁵ Having been at the head of the Gendarmerie since 1904, De Selliers was particularly unreceptive to the new currents of thought emanating from the likes of de Ryckel, judging them to be of little value after taking the post of Chief of the General Staff on 25 May 1914. His own thoughts on the matter were far more modest and returned to the idea of a central mobilisation as late as July 1914.⁸⁶ Given the predominance of Jominian teaching at the *École de Guerre* over that of Carl von Clausewitz (at least until the 1890s), it is not surprising to find many officers firmly hold on to the strategic principles developed during the mid-nineteenth century.⁸⁷

The uncertainty within the establishment did nothing to assure the Great Powers of Belgian preparedness or even willingness to fight in the event of a future war. In January 1906, the British entered into secret staff conversations through their military attaché to Brussels, Lieutenant-Colonel N.W. Barnardiston, in order to ascertain what might be expected of the Belgians in the event of a war against Germany. These had been sanctioned under the Balfour Government but were conducted under the direction of Sir Edward Grey and Lord Haldane after Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman took office.⁸⁸ In a series of meetings that ran into February,

⁸⁵ Lt.-Gen. E. Galet, *Albert King of the Belgians in the Great War* (trans. Maj.-Gen. Sir E. Swinton; Putnam, London, 1931), pp. 4–6.

⁸⁶ Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, pp. 254–255.

⁸⁷ B. Colson, 'La première traduction française du "VOM KRIEGE" de Clausewitz et sa diffusion dans les milieux français et belges avant 1914', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 26, no. 5 (1986), pp. 345–363.

⁸⁸ There has been a significant amount of work conducted on British prewar planning, 1904–1914, that came to influence their dealings with the Belgians and the French. For some of the most prominent, see J. E. Tyler, *The British Army and the Continent, 1904–1914* (E. Arnold, London, 1938); J. E. Helmreich, 'Belgian concern over neutrality and British intentions, 1906–1914', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 36 (1964), pp. 416–427; S. R. Williamson Jr., *The Politics of Grand Strategy: Britain and France Prepare for War, 1904–1914* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1969); N. d'Ombraïn, *War Machinery and High Policy: Defence Administration in Peacetime Britain 1902–1914* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973); J. Gooch, *The Plans of War: The General Staff and British Military Strategy c. 1900–1916* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1974); D. French, *British Economic and Strategic Planning, 1905–1915* (Allen & Unwin, London, 1982); K. M. Wilson, *The Policy of the Entente: Essays on the Determinants of British Foreign Policy*,

Barnardiston and Ducarne conceived of relatively detailed plans that envisioned a British force disembarking at French ports and being transported to support the Belgian field army that would have secured a defensive position on the Meuse. Although not entirely convinced of its capabilities, the British could be satisfied that such a small force could mobilise quickly enough to provide a delaying action and were confident that they would do so. The enthusiasm of Ducarne at securing British support, albeit tacit and unbinding, would attest to that. One of the few accounts of these discussions, written in 1932 after the event, indicated that the Belgian Chief of Staff said that ‘the happiest outcome, the most favourable, can be obtained by a convergent and simultaneous action by the allied forces. On the other hand, it would be a grave setback if this agreement does not materialise. Colonel Barnardiston assured me that everything would be done to this end’.⁸⁹

The anxiety demonstrated by the Belgians during these initial conversations was representative of their military concerns in 1906. Yet these were to be further exacerbated when communications ceased after the British decided to explore the French option and nurture the *Entente Cordiale*. This, coupled with Edmund Morel’s aggressive campaign against abuses in the Congo, further alienated the two nations to the point where, by 1911, the Belgian General Staff envisaged the possibility of having to counter a British invasion in their annual staff ride. Although not suggesting that staff rides were entirely representative of genuine strategic considerations, the fact that of the 13 other staff rides between 1897 and 1913 seven had considered a French, and six a German, invasion would suggest that, in this case, they were not without relevance.⁹⁰

1904–1914 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985); J. Stengers, ‘Belgium’ in Wilson (ed.), *Decisions for War 1914* (Routledge, London, 1995), pp. 151–174; W. Philpott, *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front, 1914–1918* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1996); H. Strachan, ‘The British Army, its General Staff and the Continental Commitment 1904–1914’, in D. French and B. Holden Reid (eds.), *The British General Staff: Reform and Innovation c. 1890–1939* (Routledge, London, 2002), pp. 75–94.

⁸⁹ See, F. Vandaele, ‘Les “conversations” anglo-belges d’avant guerre’, *Revue Belge des Livres, Documents et Archives de la Guerre 1914–18*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1932), pp. 63–69.

⁹⁰ For more on British reactions to the Congo, see M. E. Thomas, ‘Anglo-Belgian Military Relations and the Congo Question, 1911–1913’, *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 25 (1953), pp. 157–165; T. Packenham, *The Scramble for Africa 1876–1912* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1991), pp. 586–595 and 662; R. O. Collins, *King Leopold, England, and the Upper Nile, 1899–1909* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1968), p. 303. For more on the Belgian

Indeed, Duruy reported back to Paris in the summer of 1910 that a combination of the anti-Congo campaign and the accession of Albert I, a supposed Germanophile, had seen German influence in the country noticeably increase. Germany had, of course, been among the first to congratulate the Belgians on their annexation of the Congo in 1908. A year later, little appeared to have changed, with Duruy noting: 'This campaign has, certainly, alienated Great Britain from the sympathies of the Belgians'.⁹¹

When the British came to reopen staff conversations in April 1912, following renewed European tensions after the Agadir Crisis, it was a much colder affair. The Germanophile Jungbluth had more reason to be suspicious of British motives than his predecessor in 1906. The British, through their military attaché Lieutenant-Colonel Tom Bridges, however, were determined to extract from Belgium a pledge of support in the event of a German invasion. He was asked to discuss many things; among them, the feasibility and assistance available for a British landing at Oostende, Zeebrugge, and Antwerp.⁹² As the conversations progressed, Bridges recounted in his memoirs: 'On one occasion I was asked what would be Great Britain's attitude if Germany invaded Belgium and Belgium did not appeal for help', demonstrating the continued suspicions that had been fostered over the previous five years. The attaché replied:

[He had] ... no authority to say but ... felt sure that the British Government would regard intervention under terms of the Treaty as not only a duty but a right. At the same time [he] added, an appeal for help from Belgium would enormously strengthen the hand of our Government by rousing the sentiment of the country.⁹³

Furthermore, Bridges revealed that it was generally assumed that the Belgian Army would be incapable, even if it did fight, of halting a German advance. As such, British aid would be required at the decisive point and, significantly, would need to be in position in good time to have any serious

General Staff, see W. Marsily, *Les chefs d'état-major de l'armée belge et le respect de la neutralité* (Librairie Payot, Lousanne & Paris, 1917).

⁹¹ SHD 7 N 1156, Report by Duruy, 8 June 1910; 7 N 1157, Report by Duruy, 9 December 1911.

⁹² T. Bridges, *Alarms and Excursions: Reminiscences of a Soldier* (Longmans, London, 1938), p. 62.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

effect. Indeed, British thinking, based on the widely held assumption that Belgium would not fight, argued that it was the Empire's right, duty, and obligation as a guarantor power to 'move into Belgium and expel German troops from Belgian soil'.⁹⁴ This was completely unacceptable to Jungbluth because it undermined Belgium's neutrality and removed all agency from its decision makers. Whether the Belgians required military support or not, it was imperative that the decision rested with them. The French government had recognised this fact by restricting Joffre's Plan XVII from incorporating a preemptive advance across the border, albeit unbeknownst to the Belgians.⁹⁵

As such, the military conversations in the decade preceding the outbreak of war complicated Belgian planning to the point where neither themselves, nor their potential allies, knew how they were likely to proceed in the event of an invasion. Indeed, the British remained unconvinced of Belgium's commitment to oppose a German invasion until the event itself spurred a call for aid on 4 August 1914. By this point, however, none of the prewar plans for cooperation could be put into action. Instead, the Belgians, caught up in their own internal conflict among senior officers, were forced to react to events. De Selliers had advocated a central mobilisation and a withdrawal of divisions from the Meuse as late 30 July. The King, however, preferred to remain strictly neutral and allowed mobilisation to occur across the country's garrisons. Under the influence of de Ryckel and Galet, the order was given on 3 August to concentrate on the Meuse but events the next day prevented the Belgian Army from executing the new plan of action. Instead, it reverted to a central zone of concentration behind the Meuse.⁹⁶ Having reassembled its forces from their mobilisation points in Flanders, to face a possible British threat, Liège to face the Germans, and Namur and Maubeuge/Lille to face the French, the Belgian Army was able to react to the evolving situation. From here it fought defensive actions on the Meuse and Gette before retiring to Antwerp.

When faced with the German siege artillery that had so easily reduced the fortifications on the Meuse, the uncompleted works of Antwerp were

⁹⁴TNA, WO 106/47, DMO to CIGS, Appreciation of the Political and Military Situation in Europe, 20 September 1911.

⁹⁵D. Porch, *The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871–1914* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981), pp. 228–229; E. Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014), pp. 19–21.

⁹⁶Wanty, *Milieu Militaire Belge*, pp. 260–263.

similarly fated. Even the completed forts, Waelhem and Wavre-St. Catherine, which were expected to provide some resistance as examples of what was considered a 'perfect design', were demolished by the 420-mm shells.⁹⁷ The fate of the remaining defences was also compromised by the differing views on how best to conduct operations. While under the walls of Antwerp, command fell to the position's Governor, whose concerns were primarily to retain contact with the British and French rather than to conduct operations independently of the city. The problem was, as highlighted throughout the fortress debate, a need for sufficient manpower to adequately cover the perimeter.⁹⁸ Ultimately, the German guns rendered this point moot, and the authorities were forced to contemplate the evacuation of the entrenched camp on 1 October (suspended until 9 October) in the face of overwhelming force for which neither the army nor the fortress was prepared.

The principle of the concentration of forces evolved little over the course of the nineteenth century, although how it was sustained underwent significant changes. From the outset, Belgium struggled to come to terms with the sociomilitary conundrum of assimilating national defence (including fortresses and the effective strength of the army) with the demands of the localities charged with upholding a contested concept of neutrality. The invasion scares of 1848 led to a reassessment of the power of international law, which was subsequently buttressed by the entrenched camp and national redoubt of Antwerp in 1859. From here, the army and the nation would be able to concentrate its strength and oppose an invasion by force, if necessary, while awaiting succour from a guarantor power.

Developments in European diplomacy and military technology, however, soon undermined the foundations on which this principle was established. Further military expenditure was required to salvage it through a redevelopment of the Meuse fortifications during the 1880s that would allow an army to operate more effectively in the immediate vicinity of what had become the most likely invasion route. These constructions produced a controversial political storm that, once again as in the debate over the introduction of universal conscription, demonstrated how national questions could be subordinated to local and party interests. Only with further guarantees that the establishment would not be raised in conjunction with

⁹⁷ Galet, *Albert King of the Belgians*, pp. 201–210.

⁹⁸ H. Strachan, *The First World War: Vol I, To Arms* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001), p. 271.

the fortifications (despite its obvious necessity) was enough cross-party support garnered to pass these important modifications. Similar events occurred two decades later when Antwerp required further redevelopment.

By holding the Government to account over the size of the army in order to pass the credits for its fortifications, the electorate and their representatives largely undermined what the army was attempting to achieve. It prompted concern from neighbouring countries and stifled the development of a concerted plan of action in the event of a European conflagration that seemed all too likely. When it finally came to pass, Belgium reverted to its established plans of mobilisation and concentration, having not come to any definitive decision over the validity of its alternatives in the years preceding the outbreak of war. The army, in the midst of its belated reforms, went to war against a numerically and materially superior enemy without the close aid it had desired from its guarantors and behind defences that would prove, very quickly, to be unsuited to a modern war.

The Great War

When the Belgian Army mobilised for war on 30 July 1914, few expected it to perform with any great distinction. A linguistically, politically, and religiously fractured country that had allowed its armed forces to fall into a state of unpreparedness clearly did not have the capabilities of halting the German juggernaut. It was, however, never meant to. As such, its performance during the defensive retreat from the Meuse to the Yser, via Antwerp, had much to commend it and demonstrated a surprising unity of action that resembled something nearing national pride. Albert I, King of the Belgians, exemplified this by obstinately pursuing national objectives to the chagrin of his coalition partners. It demonstrated an agency in the self-determination of a sovereign state that has systematically been ignored in accounts of the First World War, primarily concerned with the participation of the Great Powers.

Maintaining the Belgian Army on Belgian soil for the duration of the war was of paramount importance in retaining the nation's independence and characterised the ensuing singularity of its experience compared to other belligerents. Indeed, given the relative lack of operational activity between November 1914 and April 1918, the Belgian Army's primary task was simply to endure.¹ Discipline and morale became the focus of

¹The term 'endure' is taken to mean the individual and collective coping mechanisms to combat deprivation, a sense of disempowerment, and war-weariness as illustrated in A. Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008).

attention as it battled against physical and psychological deprivations caused by the country's occupation. Separation from loved ones and news of atrocities heightened the anxiety of the average soldier to the point where war-weariness was inevitable. When combined with unresolved pre-war tensions and a breakdown in officer–man relations, it is little wonder that *Flamingantism* reared its head as the winter of 1917–1918 passed by with seemingly no end to the war in sight. Yet, to view the peaceful demonstrations as a severe breakdown of discipline or an undermining of the newly established unity that had seen both Flemings and Walloons answer the nation's call would be a mistake. The crisis of the First World War must still be viewed as a unifying event, where both Flemish and Walloon concepts of what it meant to be Belgian were proudly exhibited in a bid to reassert the Kingdom's independence as one nation. The issue at hand was to establish parity between the two identities during a conflict, the length and intensity of which tested the endurance and social fabric of more nations than one.

First World War historians have readily dismissed images of jingoistic fervour upon the outbreak of war across Europe.² Belgium was no different, especially given the direct threat posed by a probable invasion. Yet street parties and renditions of the *Brabançonne*, even before hostilities began, heralded what Alex Watson has termed a 'defensive patriotism' across the nation that may have been misconstrued as something akin to war enthusiasm.³ Jubilant scenes greeted the arrival of the Royal Family in Brussels on 4 August, despite news of the German incursion into Belgium. Again, this was no celebration. It merely displayed an affection for the monarchy as a focal point of unity in the defence of the nation. King Albert had improved the popularity of the monarchy during his short reign by making it more accessible and by projecting the image of the idyllic bourgeois family. He was, as one historian has noted, the 'Head of State in military uniform— [and] symbolised Belgium through family values, democratic hopes, and a love of progress; the sources of national and material prosperity'.⁴

² C. Pennell, *A United Kingdom: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012), pp. 38–43.

³ MRA, Fonds Personalia, 13/43, René Levèvre, *Souvenirs de Guerre 1914–1918*, p. 2; A. Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary at War, 1914–1918* (Penguin Books, London, 2014), pp. 71–72.

⁴ L. van Ypersele, 'L'image de la monarchie sous le règne du roi Albert: entre exaltation de la nation et démocratisation de la société', in E. Witte et al. (eds.), *Natie en Democratie*

L'Indépendance Belge reported cheering crowds, music, and 'a delirium of admirable patriotism, without precedent' outside Parliament at the Place de la Nation. In the Chamber itself, the Duc d'Ursel, the Catholic Senator for Mechelen, who had appeared in the uniform of his local *Régiment de Guides*, received many congratulations from his peers, while enthusiastic shouts of 'Vive le Roi' accompanied the announcement of the King's arrival, including from all the Socialists.⁵ In his speech, Albert called on the warring parties to make peace and made clear the absolute necessity for courage and unity to form the cornerstones of national defence. He made a point of referring independently to both linguistic groups to join the national struggle by recalling the heroics of the Flemings during the Battle of the Golden Spurs and the Six Hundred *Franchimontois* for the Walloons.⁶ In appealing to both populations separately from the start, Albert was acknowledging the disunity that had dominated the country's prewar social and military milieus. Yet, it also placed him at the forefront of national unification, which was to be reinforced over the course of the war.

Estimates concerning the strength of the army vary but the most often quoted figure of 117,000 regulars, supported by a further 73,000 fortress troops and auxiliaries (including the Civic Guard and Gendarmerie), saw approximately 190,000 men take to the field.⁷ These were divided into six army divisions (DA) numbering between 15,500 and 24,000 men and one cavalry division (DC) with an establishment of 4,000.⁸ Each division was made up of three or four brigades

1890–1921: *Acta Van Het Interuniversitair Colloquium Brussel 8–9 Juni 2006* (KVAB, Brussels, 2007), pp. 156–157.

⁵ *L'Indépendance Belge*, 5 August 1914; *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 5 August 1914.

⁶ K.D. Shelby, *Flemish Nationalism and the Great War: The Politics of Memory, Visual Culture and Commemoration* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014), p. 71; and L. De Vos, *La Première Guerre Mondiale* (J.M. Collet, Braine-l'Alleud, 1997), p. 28. The Battle of the Golden Spurs (1302) had seen the Flemish provinces defeat a French army outside Kortrijk, whilst the Six Hundred *Franchimontois* (1468) saw the heroic defeat of Vincent de Beuren and Gosuin de Streel's small force as they attempted to reclaim Liège from Burgundian rule by ambushing the Duke of Burgundy and Louis XI.

⁷ A. De Schrijver, *La Bataille de Liège (Août 1914)* (Liège, 1922), p. 2; and I.F.W. Beckett, *The Making of the First World War* (Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2014), p. 20.

⁸ A. de Selliers de Moranville, *Contribution à l'histoire de la Guerre Mondiale 1914–1918* (Goemaere, Brussels, 1933), p. 627. His detailed breakdown by division suggests a total of 117,500 regulars.

composed of two infantry regiments; a cavalry regiment; an artillery 'group' of 12, 75-mm guns; and an additional artillery regiment of 36, 75-, and 150-mm guns.⁹ Yet, despite the seemingly impressive numbers, comparable to those of the British Expeditionary Force, Tom Simoens has suggested that as few as 14,000 men could truly be considered 'regulars'. The majority were reservists, who had spent years away from the army with little meaningful training in the interim, while as many as 40,000 (28%) recalled conscripts actually failed to report to their depots upon mobilisation. Similar wastage rates had marred Belgium's mobilisation during the Franco-Prussian War, although the reality of German boots on home soil in 1914 did spark a spate of volunteerism that saw 18,000 men enlist to offset some of the deficit.¹⁰ Proportionately to its population, this figure was comparable to the 250,000 men estimated to have volunteered for the German land forces in the opening month of the war, despite it, too, employing a system of conscription.¹¹ This offered the first glimpse of a renewed sense of Belgian national pride that had all too often been absent when faced with the prospect of fulfilling military obligations.

Fighting began in earnest in the Liège area on 5 August as the German Army sought to break through between Boncelles and l'Ourthe towards the fortress to accomplish the well-documented *coup de main*.¹² The Belgian field army had moved from its original mobilisation positions facing all borders to the River Gette, north of the Meuse fortresses, to counter the enemy's advance. King Albert, who had taken on the Constitutional role of Commander-in-Chief, established his General Headquarters (*grand-quartier-général*, GQG) in Leuven and immediately immersed himself in the task of directing operations.

⁹ De Vos, *Première Guerre*, p. 23. De Vos' measures the total strength at approximately 200,000. For a more detailed breakdown of divisional organisation, see É. Wanty, *Le Milieu Militaire Belge de 1831 à 1914* (Palais des Académies, Brussels, 1957), p. 257.

¹⁰ T. Simoens, 'Het Belgische Leger', in L. De Vos et al., *14-18 Oorlog in België* (Davidsfonds Uitgeverij, Leuven, 2014), p. 33.

¹¹ A. Watson, "'For Kaiser and Reich': The identity and fate of the German volunteers, 1914-1918," in *War in History*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2005), pp. 47-48.

¹² R. Foley, *Alfred von Schlieffen's Military Writings* (Frank Cass, London & Portland, 2003), p. 179; D. Stevenson, *1914-1918: The History of the First World War* (Penguin Books, London, 2012), p. 51; D. Stevenson, 'Battlefield or barrier? Rearmament and military planning in Belgium, 1902-1914', *The International History Review*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2007), pp. 482-483. For more general appreciations of Belgium in German planning, see Thomas, *The Guarantee*, pp. 419-423.

Despite having been schooled as a soldier from an early age, it proved a daunting task for the monarch who felt the need to draw heavily on the experience of his advisors. Recognising that his army was ill-equipped to undertake successful offensive operations, Albert initially heeded the prudent counsel of the Chief of the General Staff, Antonin de Selliers de Moranville, who wished to remain on the strategic defensive behind the Gette. Although most of the army did so, two divisions, 3DA and 4DA, were kept in the Liège and Namur vicinities, respectively, to offer support to the fortresses. Despite courageous efforts to hold ground, 3DA was all but routed by 7 August, as the first German shells hit Liège. The infantry's advance culminated in the fabled surrender of the citadel to Ludendorff's 'knock' on the gates. Local command of the area was placed in the hands of Lieutenant-General Georges Leman who conducted operations from the outlying forts, while Albert and his staff contemplated saving the remainder of the field army.

The vindication of de Selliers' fears over not uniting the entirety of the field army ought to have consolidated his position as the King's most trusted advisor. Yet the intrigue within GQG merely intensified as officers jostled for positions of influence. Even the Prime Minister, Charles de Broqueville, complained of being marginalised as Albert's circle of confidants grew more exclusive and insular. According to his biographer, Henri Haag, not once was he called to GQG for consultation over operational plans in the opening week of hostilities and only learned of their existence after the events had occurred.¹³ This was a particularly concerning issue, given that de Broqueville also held the portfolio for Minister of War and was constitutionally bound to countersign the orders of the Commander-in-Chief both as a parliamentary safeguard and to protect the monarch from accusations of wrongdoing. A combination of a lack of military expertise and the need to run civil affairs from Brussels, however, meant that de Broqueville did not join the King at GQG from the outset. To conform with his constitutional duty, a tacit agreement was struck that he would agree to countersign any decision by the King through his confidant, de Selliers, despite its seeming illegality. This did not remove the burden of responsibility from the shoulders of the Minister of War but rather exposed the deficiencies of a system that did not allow for adequate cooperation between himself and the

¹³H. Haag, *Le comte Charles de Broqueville, Ministre d'État, et les luttes pour le pouvoir (1910–1940)* Tome I, (Louvain-la-Neuve & Brussels, 1990), p. 236.

General Staff.¹⁴ From the outset, therefore, a gulf was established in civil-military relations that proved increasingly difficult to bridge and gave free rein to the military authorities to advise the King in the conduct of operations without parliamentary constraints for the duration of the war.

Although de Broqueville had helped foster this unenviable situation, he naturally resented being pushed further to the peripheries. De Selliers attempted to keep the Premier informed of events but soon found himself a victim of internal rivalries too. On 10 August, the Chief of the General Staff was sidelined because Lieutenant-Generals Harry Jungbluth and Baron Louis de Ryckel, as well as Captain-Commandant Émile Galet, of the Royal Household, had gained favour. The following day de Selliers was removed as Chief of the General Staff. Both he and de Broqueville tendered their resignations, which were flatly refused, leaving the Premier temporarily blind in matters of military operations. This was especially the case when the remaining officers with personal affiliations to him turned down his advances in order to secure their own positions at GQG under the increasing control of the King.¹⁵

By 13 August the German Army began to make some headway against the outlying Liège forts, which had refused to surrender. Two 420-mm Krupp guns had been brought up to the village of Mortier to support the 305-mm Skoda pieces to destroy the fort of Pontisse with 13 direct hits.¹⁶ Fléron fell the next day, while Loncin was literally lifted from the ground on the 15th, burying 300 of its occupants when a shell pierced the concrete structure and hit the powder magazine. Leman, who had been conducting the defence of the area from Loncin, was injured and taken prisoner. Officers from neighbouring forts were invited by the Germans to view the ruins, which accelerated the capitulation of the forts of Flémalle and d'Hollogne.¹⁷ Resistance was finally broken at Liège on 16 August, while to the southwest, the fortress of Namur, supported by 4DA, held out until 24 August when its garrison was forced into a disorderly retreat by overwhelming forces.¹⁸

¹⁴ de Selliers, *Contribution*, p. XLV.

¹⁵ For more detail on the estrangement of de Selliers and de Broqueville, see Haag, *de Broqueville*, Tome 1, pp. 232–239; de Selliers de Moranville, *Contribution*, pp. 270–271.

¹⁶ M. Prášil, *Skoda Heavy Guns* (Schiffer Military/Aviation History, Atglen, PA, 1997), pp. 6–10.

¹⁷ De Vos, *Première Guerre*, p. 34.

¹⁸ For a slightly different operational view of the battle around Liège, see T. Zuber, *Ten Days in August: The Siege of Liège 1914* (Spellmount, Stroud, 2014).

Although the position at Liège was eventually lost, the battle had exhibited an unexpected tenacity among the Belgian defenders despite their inferior numbers and materiel. Liège had tied down up to 100,000 German troops, which allowed the rest of the field army to escape. Meanwhile, Namur held up 153,000 men that may have been decisive in the Battle of the Frontiers.¹⁹ The Meuse fortresses had, in effect, achieved their objectives in delaying the German onslaught. However, as Hew Strachan has noted, despite resisting for 13 days, in reality the delay to the Schlieffen Plan was at most two, as the concentration of active corps was not completed until 13 August.²⁰ Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the forts had been built primarily as strongpoints on which the army could manoeuvre, not as an impregnable barrier. Certainly, they had been provisioned to hold out for longer, but the reality was that the unaltered structures of the late 1880s were simply unable to cope with the calibre and explosive power of the latest heavy artillery.²¹

Faced with the loss of Liège and a worsening situation, de Broqueville obtained an audience with the King to discuss the eventuality of a German breakthrough towards the centre of the country and Brussels itself. A working relationship between the two was reestablished through the reinstatement of de Selliers to his former position, providing yet another voice of prudence amidst the German advance on 18 August.²² Following heavy fighting around Aarschot on 21 August, and with the army in danger of encirclement, the decision was made to fall back on the national redoubt at Antwerp to which the rest of the Royal Family, the Government, and a swarm of refugees had already fled. The chaos of war appeared to be in full force as soldiers recorded the volume of orders and counterorders issued as the army was forced to retreat.²³ Approximately 80,000 men reached Antwerp, which itself boasted a garrison of 70,000 fortress troops. Most of the losses had been sustained by 3DA and 4DA in their attempts to support the fortresses, with many of those who were not casualties or

¹⁹C. Terlinden, *Histoire Militaire des Belges* (La Renaissance du Livre, Brussels, 1931), pp. 332 and 339.

²⁰H. Strachan, *The First World War: Volume I—To Arms* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001), pp. 211–212.

²¹De Vos, *Première Guerre*, p. 30.

²²Haag, *de Broqueville*, Tome 1, p. 243.

²³MRA, Fonds Personalía, 2/16, René Deckers, *Journal de Campagne 1914–1918*, p. 3; entry for 21 August 1914.

prisoners forced to undertake the arduous journey through northern France to Le Havre or Cherbourg for embarkation to rejoin the main force in Antwerp.²⁴

Pleas for French and British assistance to move farther north were largely ignored as Joffre rubbished the reports reaching him of the strength of the German forces facing the Belgians.²⁵ The difficulties of fighting in coalition became blatantly apparent as the physical gap between the Belgian and Allied Forces was only surpassed by the impassable gulf in aims and expectations. While King Albert saw the primary objective of the guarantor powers to eject the invader from Belgian territory, Joffre viewed the substandard Belgian Army merely as an 'adjunct to a grand allied conception orchestrated by himself'.²⁶ The apparent gravity of the situation on the Marne did see Albert attempt to relieve some pressure through coordinated diversionary attacks around Antwerp on 9 and 10 September, which retook Aarschot and even reached Leuven. However, the effect of these sorties is somewhat debatable. Despite Belgian action forcing the Germans to recall reinforcements being moved to face the Allies, the majority were reserve divisions; a fact duly glossed over by Belgium's definitive operational history of the war.²⁷

Growing German pressure, through von Beseler's reinforcements and the moving up of heavy artillery from 27 September, firmly placed the Belgians on the back foot. Having always recognised the capital importance of Antwerp, the British Cabinet sanctioned the dispatch of the 7th Division to it on 1 October, providing that the French would match their effort. Unwilling to weaken his overall plan of envelopment for what he considered a futile operation, Joffre merely released a Territorial Division and a brigade of marine fusiliers, resulting in the British decision not to

²⁴ One example saw the 1st Lancers march for 13 days and 13 nights along with disparate elements of 4DA to reach Le Havre before rejoining the army in Antwerp on 6 September.

²⁵ Galet, *Albert King of the Belgians*, pp. 148–151; W. Philpott, *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front, 1914–1918* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 19–21; W. Philpott, 'Britain, France and the Belgian Army', in B. Bond et al. (eds.), *'Look to Your Front': Studies in the First World War by the British Commission for Military History* (Sepplmount, Staplehurst, 1999), p. 125.

²⁶ Strachan, *To Arms*, p. 216.

²⁷ M. Tasnier and R. Van Overstraeten, *L'Armée Belge dans la Guerre Mondiale* (Brussels, 1931), p. 143; De Vos, *Première Guerre*, pp. 38 and 47–48; J. E. Edmonds, *History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium 1914* (Imperial War Museum, London, 1933), p. 357.

risk their own regulars without adequate support.²⁸ Judging it more important to facilitate the junction between all armies, the French Territorials were deployed only in the Poperinghe area, sending the marines to the city. Given the decision to evacuate the Government on 1 and 2 October, the British were more forthcoming in their efforts to save the city and its garrison after this point. Through correspondence with their military attaché, Sir Francis Villiers, it was learned that the Belgian field army was also to be evacuated, producing an impromptu visit to Antwerp by Winston Churchill on 3 October to better grasp the situation and delay any such decision for 10 days until a Franco-British relief force could be assembled. In the meantime, two Naval Brigades were disembarked in Dunkirk, bound for Antwerp, to be interspersed among the beleaguered Belgian troops 'to impart the encouragement and assurance that succour was at hand'.²⁹

Ultimately, the relief force could not be concentrated in time and heavy fighting between 4 and 8 October forced King Albert's hand. In consort with his advisors as well as Queen Elisabeth, the position was deemed untenable despite the promised aid. The army left that night, heading south towards the Ghent-Terneuzen Canal, eventually reaching the River Yser on 14 October. Despite leaving the fortress troops behind to cover the retreat, the city was forced to capitulate on 9 October, prompting a mass exodus of some 33,000 Belgian troops towards the Netherlands where they were interned for the duration of the war.³⁰ It was not a decision taken lightly, but the very real threat of being cut off through a German movement farther south would have all but ended the army's participation in the conflict and, in turn, the continued existence of an independent Belgium.

As Albert noted in his war diary on 1 January 1915 when refuting advances made by Sir John French to have the remaining Belgian forces amalgamated into the British Army: 'My country can only make its existence felt through its Army and it would never understand a change which would be equivalent to suppressing the latter'.³¹ This reflected the attitude

²⁸ I.F.W. Beckett, *Ypres: The First Battle, 1914* (Routledge, London, 2006), pp. 22–31.

²⁹ W. Churchill, *The World Crisis 1911–1918*, Volume I (Odhams Press, London, 1939), p. 315.

³⁰ De Vos, *Première Guerre*, p. 49.

³¹ Albert I, *The War Diaries of Albert I King of the Belgians*. Published from the original manuscript and in their entirety. Edited by R. Van Overstraeten (William Kimber, London, 1954), p. 27.

and action of a king and a country that had all too often been denied its rightful agency. Belgium was not simply a geographical location where the war took place; it was a sovereign nation capable of playing its own individual role in a conflict that threatened its future. Indeed, the claims of Elizabeth Greenhalgh and William Philpott that it was, respectively, Joffre's or Foch's influence that persuaded the Belgians to hold the Yser line rather than retreat to Calais is a case in point.³² The French merely suggested that the Belgians should reorganise in the region of Nieupoort-Furnes-Dixmuide.³³ It was unquestionably Albert's decision, based on his personal appraisal of the situation, which required the maintenance of a Belgian force on Belgian soil for purposes of morale and international prestige. In a worst-case scenario, Albert envisaged withdrawing his remaining forces to Britain, not to France, but fervently refuted any contemplation of further retreat. He warned all divisional commanders that they would be dismissed if they abandoned their positions, all officers and men that fleeing would result in being shot, and that absence through sickness would end in court martial.³⁴

While further stubbornness in the pursuit of national interests punctuated the coalition's relationship with the King for the rest of the war, it was an unmistakable reminder that they were dealing with an active partner and not a submissive appendage. Clear in his own mind of Belgium's war-time policy, Albert frequently clashed with the Entente's strategic and operational planning. Having never signed the September 1914 Pact of London that committed the Allied nations to concerted action, Albert was free to do as he pleased, though in doing so, became increasingly isolated from the decision-making process. In pursuing a separate diplomatic and military policy throughout 1916 and 1917, the Belgians were unable to influence discussions at Chantilly and were enraged at proposals for a British offensive from Ypres across Belgian soil in 1916.³⁵ Nevertheless, Albert retained independence of action for the duration of the war, as was his right, and continued to exercise it to what he believed was the benefit of his kingdom.

³² E. Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014), p. 51; Philpott, 'Britain', p. 126.

³³ J. Vanwelkenhuyzen, 'Le Haut Commandement Belge et les Alliés en 1914–1918 et en Mai 1940', *Revue Belge d'Histoire Militaire*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1983), p. 9.

³⁴ Beckett, *Making of the First World War*, p. 22.

³⁵ Philpott, 'Britain', pp. 122–123.

The ensuing Battle of the Yser was undoubtedly the most important action of the war for the ailing Belgian Army. From the first German offensive on 18 October until the completion of the inundations on the 31st—which effectively ended the conduct of major operations between Nieuwpoort and Ypres for the remainder of the war—the tenacity, courage, and resources of the now just 75,000-strong Belgian Army were severely tested. Despite facing mainly reserve and *Ersatz* Divisions, the weight of numbers and the disorganisation of the Belgians saw the Germans cross the Yser at Tervate on 21 October. By the 24th, the situation looked even worse, despite French support. The railway line between Dixmude and Nieuwpoort came under threat and was only held onto by the Belgians during a small respite in the fighting when the Germans were found to lack reserves. This lull, coupled with the opening of the locks at Nieuwpoort (on the third attempt in as many days) brought an end to the battle that claimed 14,000 Belgian casualties and much of its materiel.³⁶ It was a much-needed reprieve for a force that had become so weary and demoralised by the engagement as to genuinely raise concerns within the French high command that contact between their troops and Belgian remnants might see the demoralisation spread.³⁷ Despite Foch's subsequent attempts to claim the idea to flood the area as his own, his suggestion, allegedly made to the Belgians on 25 October, concerned the Dunkirk region, not the Yser. The actual proposition to flood the Yser plain was made as early as 19 October by the chief lockmaster Gerard Dingens, although others, such as Captains-Commandant Delarmoy and Nuyten, have similarly been credited. Irrespective of this, it was a Belgian decision based on the deteriorating military situation.³⁸

The action was decisive in as much as it ensured the continued presence of Belgian soldiers on Belgian soil, tied up German units opposite them, and blocked the route to Calais. On a wider scale, the decision to unleash the 'silent conqueror' that created a lagoon of between 18 and 21 miles in length, between 1¾ and 2½ miles in width, and three to four feet deep has even been hailed as one of the major turning points of the war as it not only prevented a German breakthrough but also helped establish the deadlock on the Western Front by bookending one side of the frontline

³⁶ De Vos, *Première Guerre*, pp. 56–60.

³⁷ IFFRC MI 7375, Diary of a Squadron-Commandant 1st Lancers, 27 October 1914.

³⁸ Beckett, *Making of the First World War*, pp. 25–30.

that ran from Switzerland to the sea.³⁹ It was a defensive victory of which the small army could be proud, and one that the King, in his steadfast application to the role of Commander-in-Chief, could claim as his own.

Although the Belgian Army largely achieved its objective of delaying the invading army long enough for help to reach it before it collapsed, the campaign had hardly been without fault. As de Selliers recalled in 1915, the preparedness of the army to go to war had been severely compromised by the large-scale reorganisation of its forces and the glaring deficiencies in its equipment, particularly in heavy artillery.⁴⁰ Not only had the prewar political wrangling prevented the army from obtaining its desired establishment of 340,000 men in time, but it had also led to a situation whereby men recruited under four different systems were recalled in 1914 to form its regiments; the majority of whom with no more than 15 months of service. In comparison to the French Army's three-year law and the German Army's two-year regular term of service, the Belgian Army appeared to lack the requisite training and experience.

Compounding matters further was the lack of a suitable officer reserve that left many 'doubled-up' regiments lacking in quality leadership.⁴¹ Indeed, on the outbreak of war, there were only 420 reserve officers available for commission, though a steady influx of former Civic Guard officers returning to regular service swelled this number to 1,421 by 1917.⁴² Nevertheless, the aptitude of officers throughout the army was variable, with NCOs often taking on a far greater role than might otherwise have been the case. Even at senior levels, the fact that five out of six Divisional Commanders were relieved of their positions before Christmas 1914 demonstrated a general lack of ability to cope under the stresses of war.

Naturally, the prewar decisions not to invest in heavy artillery or machine guns proved debilitating in the opening exchanges. Indeed, the field artillery was comprised almost entirely of 75-mm rapid-firing guns,

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 14–15.

⁴⁰ AER, POS. 6505-160, Van der Elst Papers, De Selliers de Moranville to Van der Elst, 14 April 1915.

⁴¹ This was a process that saw each regiment double in size to form a brigade in itself, supported by an affiliated regiment of fortress troops. For example, the 2nd Line Infantry Regiment would double its cadre to form the basis of the 22nd Line Infantry Regiment as well. For more on this, see L. A. Lecleir, *L'Infanterie: Filiations et Traditions* (Service de l'Histoire des Forces Armées Belges, Brussels, 1973), pp. 66–67.

⁴² E. A. Jacobs, 'Climat psychologique du cadre de réserve belge avant 1914', *Revue Internationale de l'Histoire Militaire*, vol. 29 (1970), p. 813.

split into one group of three batteries (12 guns) per mixed brigade, or simply one or two groups per division. As such, a total of just 348 guns, of which 12 were attached to the cavalry, represented a ratio of just below three guns for each infantry battalion.⁴³ This followed the trend set in France of relying on high rates of fire to achieve rapid results but was quickly made obsolete by the Germans, whose decision in 1908–1909 to equip each division in its field army with 18, 105-mm Howitzers, supplemented by a corps and reserve artillery comprised of 150-mm and 210-mm pieces, was soon justified.⁴⁴ Despite its acclaim as an exceptional piece of equipment, the 75-mm guns' restricted range of around six kilometres necessitated five Royal Navy cruisers to cover the Belgian Army's lack of heavy artillery during the Yser campaign, which consisted of just 12, 149-mm guns and a single Krupp piece lifted from the Antwerp fortress during its evacuation.⁴⁵

Similarly, a lack of foresight had restricted the number of machine guns in service on the outbreak of war. A lack of appreciation for their future value had seen the Minister of War, Joseph Hellebaut, order just 40 Hotchkiss machine guns in 1910 to be attached to the mobile defence force of Antwerp, while 104 Maxims (1911 model) delivered in 1912 were found to be nothing short of worthless after rigorous tests uncovered several flaws.⁴⁶ On 1 August 1914, the army had one machine gun company for each mixed brigade, totalling 120 pieces. This produced a ratio of just one machine gun per battalion, which proved to be wholly insufficient for the war ahead.⁴⁷ The mere fact that by 15 August a further 94 Hotchkiss machine guns had been purchased to improve the army's firepower demonstrates the belated recognition of their worth and the mistakes made prior to the outbreak of war.

More tellingly, the Belgian Army felt incapable of contributing to any major offensives until 1918. Manpower was at a premium until at least the start of 1916 by which time the army's effective strength had recovered to approximately 120,000 men. Calls for volunteers of able-bodied

⁴³ Ministry of War, 'Les opérations de l'Armée belge pendant la campagne de 1914–1918 (relation succincte) (suite)', *Bulletin Belge des Sciences Militaires*, no. 4 (1928), pp. 298–299.

⁴⁴ S. Bidwell and D. Graham, *Fire-Power: The British Army Weapons & Theories of War 1904–1945* (Pen & Sword, Barnsley, 2004), pp. 14–17.

⁴⁵ De Vos, *Première Guerre*, pp. 54–55; 'Les opérations', p. 300.

⁴⁶ J. Hellebaut, *Mémoires du Lieutenant Général Joseph Hellebaut: Ancien Ministre de la Guerre* (Groemaere, Brussels, 1933), pp. 148–149.

⁴⁷ 'Les opérations', pp. 296–297.

men between the ages of 18 and 30 in 1914 were followed by a Royal Decree in March 1915, which effectively conscripted all 18- to 25-year-olds in unoccupied Belgium, Britain, and France to form that year's contingent, with exemptions for those married prior to 15 November 1914. This was extended to all foreign countries on 6 November 1915 and eventually produced a respectable 18,000 recruits, not including the constant trickle of returnees and volunteers from occupied territory. A general appeal was again made on 21 July 1916 to obtain, within reason, the remaining manpower available without disrupting industry. All Belgian men born between 30 June 1876 and 1 July 1898 were called up to serve in the army, factories, or the general interest. Married men born after 30 June 1886 and single men born after 30 June 1881 were to go to the army, the others to the auxiliary services. It furnished a further 21,000 combatants who began to be incorporated from September 1916. Small numbers of Belgian officers and NCOs returned to Europe periodically as the *Force Publique's* commitment to the East African campaign relied increasingly on local levies and British aid—though this barely made a difference to the establishment.⁴⁸ Two more laws in May 1917 and February 1918 further scraped the barrel and obtained 2,000 and 3,300 men, respectively, demonstrating that the manpower ceiling was not reached until relatively late in the war.⁴⁹

Belgian industry took time to restart production following its relocation to sites in northern France and across the United Kingdom. Financing its war effort was an obvious thorn in the Government's side, which relied heavily on loans from friendly powers, particularly the United States.⁵⁰ Once up and running, factories tended to focus on munitions and small arms production, forcing the army to acquire their desired artillery pieces from their coalition partners. When up and running, the skilled workers from Belgium's prewar arms industry in Herstal and Liège, employed in a

⁴⁸ In May 1916 Belgian forces in East Africa numbered just 719 European and 11,689 black soldiers. By 1917, there appear to have been just Europeans available for service. See H. Strachan, *The First World War in Africa* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004), pp. 152 and 169. For Belgium's African campaigns, see pp. 112–114, 152–156, 169, and 173–174.

⁴⁹ Tasnier and Van Overstraeten, *L'Armée Belge*, pp. 316–318.

⁵⁰ H. Strachan, *Financing the First World War* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004), p. 204.

factory in Birmingham, were able to furnish 30,000 rifles and carbines along with other accoutrements each week by war's end.⁵¹

In the meantime, Captain-Commandant Blaise was placed in charge of procuring the required materiel to bring the army back up to strength, working closely with both French and British Governments as well as directly with firms such as Vickers. The purchasing of 105-mm, 120-mm, and 150-mm Schneider guns from the French over the course of 1915 allowed a heavy artillery regiment to be created and for a more varied distribution of guns across the six army divisions.⁵² Similar advances were made to the British Government to obtain 9.2" and 12" guns as well as 6" mortars, although the War Office often deferred the final decision to GHQ in France, which was more reluctant to see its equipment used by another army.⁵³ To facilitate the procedure, de Broqueville suggested that Blaise might remind the British that the Belgians were holding the longest front proportionate to the size of its army and that, if they broke, the road to Dunkirk and Calais would be wide open.⁵⁴ Even though this was partially true in 1916, the chances of a major German offensive across the quagmire separating them from the Belgians was minimal, especially given the concentration of reserve formations stationed in the sector due to its comparatively quiet nature. In the end, British guns were delivered to the Belgians with the caveat that the newly created 7th Artillery Regiment would support the British in the Ypres sector when required.⁵⁵

By 1918 the Belgian Army was in a much better state of preparedness in terms of its equipment and experience. Indeed, its artillery could now count on 12 days' worth of ammunition, while a series of successful trench raids in late 1917 had given the infantry a sense of confidence in its offensive capabilities.⁵⁶ Yet, it was the defence of Merkem in April 1918 during the German Spring offensives that highlighted the newly acquired steel of the army—albeit against second-rate troops. King Albert still had reservations about his army's ability to attack, but politics and prestige overrode prudence as momentum shifted in the Allies' favour. The Belgian Army

⁵¹ Tasnier and Van Overstraeten, *L'Armée Belge*, p. 314.

⁵² 'Les opérations', pp. 299–300.

⁵³ AER, POS. 1510/90-548, de Broqueville Papers, Blaise to de Broqueville, 5 April 1916.

⁵⁴ Ibid., de Broqueville to Captains Commandant Blaise and Quintin, 17 April 1916.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Tasnier and Van Overstraeten, *L'Armée belge*, pp. 259 and 313.

could not be seen to sit back and allow the Allies to liberate the country for it and then expect to take a seat as an equal partner at the peace table.⁵⁷ Albert had already irritated Foch by refusing to place his reserves at the behest of Plumer's II Army following the second wave of the German Spring Offensives in mid-April.⁵⁸ Although this proved to be the correct decision once the Germans attacked towards Merkem and Langemark on 17 April, it was clear that the Belgians could not remain aloof forever.

On 24 April 1918, King Albert was confronted with a political move designed to force the pace on the matter of coalition, which would effectively remove from his person the right to conduct military operations. Having passed on the Ministry of War to Lieutenant-General Armand De Ceuninck in August 1917, the Premier and new Minister of Defence and National Reconstruction, de Broqueville, was summoned to an audience to explain a memorandum written by his Cabinet Chief, Count Louis de Lichtervelde. In it, a differing interpretation of the Constitution saw the powers vested in the Monarch to assume the role of Commander-in-Chief as a governmental prerogative. This meant that the Royal Decree of 20 November 1916, which made the Chief of the General Staff an executant of the King's orders, actually made him directly responsible to the Minister of War. It was, therefore, the Government, through the Minister of War, that ought to determine the conduct of operations with the Monarch merely acting in an advisory role. Recognising the similarities in the situation, which had seen the French Government take back control from Joffre after Verdun, Albert saw the move as a conspiracy between French and Belgian officials to expedite the process of turning his army over to Foch's command.⁵⁹ This was not de Broqueville's doing; in fact the Premier was steadfast in his support of the King's right to

⁵⁷ For more on Belgian war aims, see D. Stevenson, 'Belgium, Luxemburg, and the Defence of Western Europe, 1914–1920', *The International History Review*, vol. 4, no. 4 (1982), pp. 504–522.

⁵⁸ M-R. Thielemans, 'Le roi Albert, le haut commandement et le commandement unique des armées alliées en 1918', in P. Lefevre and P. De Gryse (eds.), *De Brialmont à l'Union de l'Europe Occidentale: Mélanges d'Histoire Militaire Offerts à Albert Duchesne, Jean Lorette et Jean-Léon Charles* (Musée Royale de l'Armée, Brussels, 1988), pp. 89–90. The reasons given were (1) the pressure on Plumer appeared to have abated, (2) it would be dangerous to extend the Belgian front, (3) moving reserves to the south would weaken the allied left wing covering the Pas-de-Calais, and (4) the Belgian Constitution prohibited placing parts of the army under the orders of foreign commanders.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 97. For the French civil-military issues after Verdun, see Greenhalgh, *French Army*, pp. 167–169.

command after a working solution was found to the issues raised in 1914. Having not obtained any concessions on the matter, however, pressure from the rest of the Cabinet forced de Broqueville to tender his resignation on 24 May 1918; it was duly accepted a week later. He was succeeded by Gérard Cooreman on 1 June, who led the Government through the remainder of the war before promptly resigning on 21 November 1918.

When King Albert was finally predisposed to cooperating with the Allied Forces in mid-September 1918, it came at the cost of distancing himself from his confidant Émile Galet, who continued to extol the virtues of the defensive. Nonetheless, having witnessed French successes in July, and patched up relations with Foch and Clemenceau, the King saw an opportunity to gain a political advantage for Belgium through cooperation.⁶⁰ Against the advice of his counsellors, offensive operations under Foch's strategic overview were sanctioned. For the first time in more than four years, Albert agreed to subordinate himself to his allies in return for receiving command of a mixed Anglo-Franco-Belgian Army group. The Army of Flanders—later the Group of Armies of the North—was comprised of the British II Army, the Belgian Army, and seven French corps of three divisions each as well as the 2nd Cavalry Corps and some artillery. Fearing that both he and his generals were perhaps too unfamiliar with offensive operations, Albert undertook another bold move and a further cooperative measure by requesting General Degoutte, who had distinguished himself at the head of the French 6th Army, to join his staff.⁶¹ Perhaps as an indication that he, and not the Government, controlled the fate of the army, Albert did not inform the Cabinet of the change in the command structure until 26 September, a full 15 days after it had been agreed to, and just two days before the start of the offensive.⁶² It was the first indication of a Belgian aspiration to fall in line with the Entente's strategic vision and, perhaps cynically, only because of the turning tide. Albert who had not always agreed with the decision to fight towards an uncompromised peace now saw an opportunity and felt that the time was right to push his newly combined forces towards a final decision.

⁶⁰ Thielemans, 'Le roi Albert', p. 108.

⁶¹ Tasnier and Van Overstraeten, *L'Armée Belge*, p. 377.

⁶² Thielemans, 'Le roi Albert', p. 108.

The Belgian contribution to the 1918 offensive amounted to 167,000 men, 1,100 guns, and 100 aircraft.⁶³ On the first day of the offensive (28 September), nine of the Belgian Army's 12 infantry divisions made an eight kilometre advance despite the inclement weather. Significant gains were made in the Houllthulst Forest, while the British also achieved all their objectives. The German defences were strong but thinly held by infantry that were no match for the comparatively fresh and eager Belgians who had waited patiently for four years to attack with full force. Albeit drawing towards a conclusion, neither side knew that the war was to end within six weeks and fighting remained intense. The three-day offensive came at a cost of 10,000 casualties. Belgian casualty figures of 1,012 officers and 29,056 NCOs and other ranks killed, wounded, or missing between 28 September and 11 November underscores their commitment to the offensives to liberate their country.⁶⁴ Indeed, Plumer's biographer noted with alacrity the excellent work carried out by the Belgians during this time, particularly in comparison to the French contribution. He even hailed the Belgians' use of air supply on 2 October as 'an early harbinger of a battle-winning weapon of World War Two, but one to which post war armies paid no significant attention'.⁶⁵ Although King Albert remained reluctant to fight to the bitter end for the sake of it, the Belgians felt that they were denied a victorious entrance into Brussels by the premature signing of the Armistice.⁶⁶ Ghent was due to be liberated the following day and Brussels soon after. Nevertheless, the sight of Belgian troops participating in the final offensives was of great importance to national pride and was a timely reminder to all that they, too, had endured the war and contributed to its ultimate victorious conclusion.

In the intervening years from the Yser campaign to the Hundred Days, the war changed for the Belgian Army from one of fighting to one of recovery and subsequently endurance. By the time the army had reached the Yser, morale had sunk to worryingly low levels as a succession of military setbacks, weariness, and a seemingly endless retreat all contributed to dampen the optimism of a quick and victorious war. Indeed, among

⁶³ De Vos, *Première Guerre*, p. 156.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 158; Tasnier and Van Overstraeten, *L'Armée Belge*, pp. 387 and 401.

⁶⁵ G. Powell, *Plumer, The Soldier's General: A Biography of Field-Marshal Viscount Plumer of Messines* (Leo Cooper, London, 1990), p. 275. For discussion of operations as part of the Group of Armies of the North, see pp. 272–279.

⁶⁶ Vanwelkenhuyzen, 'Haut Commandement', p. 32.

the older reservists and fortress troops, morale was said to be ‘deplorable and rather discouraging’ by November 1914 as the war of movement mutated into its static state.⁶⁷

The retreat had placed unprecedented strain on the army, with many services, officers, and men struggling to cope with the chaos of war. This accounts for the disproportionately high number of courts martial cases, which resulted in seven of Belgium’s 12 military executions being carried out before Christmas 1914. Confusion during the retreat certainly placed undue pressure on the antiquated military judicial system to act quickly, but the idea put forward by the likes of Siegfried Debaeke and Jacques Maes that the prosecutors acted arbitrarily and inadequately ignores the extenuating circumstances and nuances of the situation.⁶⁸ Certainly, the degree of leniency in the opening months of the war was much reduced by the King and the military authorities owing to the necessity of keeping the army in the field. Still, it was not disproportionately harsh compared to other armies. In fact, the French Army, too, carried out a third of its wartime executions during the same period, underlining the effects that the stresses and chaos experienced during the war of movement could have in forcing the hand of the military authorities to keep order in the ranks.⁶⁹

There is some evidence to suggest that the seven executions in 1914, and the subsequent three in May and July 1915, were partly motivated by a desire to create a deterrent. The well-documented words of Lieutenant-General De Ceuninck, when commanding 6DA in 1915, attest to this fact: ‘We are approaching the bad season, and life in the trenches will be difficult; already certain transgressions of the mind are manifesting themselves; it is imperative to curb this evil through a severe

⁶⁷ MRA, Fonds Personalia, 2/16, René Deckers, *Journal de Campagne 1914–1918*, p. 14. Entry for 6 November 1914.

⁶⁸ For more on the technical workings of the military judicial system, see T. Simoens, ‘Belgian Military Justice in the First World War: A Difficult Expansion’, in M. De Koster et al. (eds.), *Justice in Wartime and Revolutions: Europe, 1795–1950/Justice en Temps de Guerre et Révolutions: Europe, 1795–1950* (Algemeen Rijksarchief/Archives Générales du Royaume, Brussels, 2012), pp. 183–202. For contrary views on the repressive nature of the army on the individual, see S. Debaeke, *De Dood met de Kogel: Elf Arme Drommels Ten Onrechte Gefusilleerd?* (De Klaproos, Bruges, 2008); J. Maes, ‘Het Belgisch Militair Gerecht tijdens de Eerste wereldoorlog. Een portret van de geëxecuteerden’, *Cahiers d’Histoire du Temps Présent*, no. 16 (2005), pp. 197–236.

⁶⁹ Greenhalgh, *French Army*, p. 62.

example. From this point of view, the results obtained in May have been very satisfying'.⁷⁰ While the manner of the retreat provided opportunities to desert by blending into the fleeing throngs of refugees, only a minority attempted to take advantage.⁷¹ Indeed, many soldiers often found themselves inadvertently cut off from their units for a period of time, which could similarly land them before the military courts. To suggest that there was no leniency, however, would be a gross misrepresentation. Prosecutors frequently attempted to find technicalities that would acquit the accused, while certain officers preferred to deal with matters internally without recourse to courts martial.⁷² Even the King, who was placed in the position as Head of State and Commander-in-Chief, granted pardons to at least 19 men who had been sentenced to death between November 1914 and May 1915.⁷³ This demonstrated two things: first that the executions before the summer of 1915 were not done so arbitrarily, and second that the intensity with which they were carried out was higher in the opening months of the war because of the critical nature of the situation that necessitated the firm hand of authority to maintain the army's discipline.

With the passing of the immediate threat, however, the decision was made in July 1915 to suspend the death penalty for any crime other than murder, of which there were just two such cases in 1918.⁷⁴ When it is considered that of the 365,000 men who passed through the Belgian Army during the First World War, only 220 were sentenced to death, of which 12 were carried out, the coercive element to maintain morale was not, as David Englander has suggested, disproportionately harsh compared to its French counterparts.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ S. Horvat, *De Vervolging van Militairrechtelijke Delicten Tijdens Wereldoorlog I: De Werking van het Belgisch Krijgsgerecht* (Vubpress, Brussels, 2011), p. 381.

⁷¹ For more on the details of each of the 12 execution cases, see Maes, 'Belgisch Militair Gerecht'.

⁷² Simoens, 'Belgian military justice', pp. 189 and 192–193.

⁷³ S. Horvat, *Vervolging*, p. 380.

⁷⁴ One was for the murder of an NCO in the 2nd Grenadiers, the other the murder of a civilian. For the latter, see B. Amez and X. Rousseaux, 'L'affaire Ferfaille en "Belgique Libre" (27 Octobre 1917 to 26 Mars 1918): Excès de la justice militaire, laboratoire de la justice scientifique ou instrument de l'affirmation nationale?', in M. De Koster et al. (eds.), *Justice in Wartime and Revolutions: Europe, 1795–1950/Justice en temps de guerre et révolutions: Europe, 1795–1950* (Algemeen Rijksarchief, Brussels, 2012), pp. 135–161.

⁷⁵ D. Englander, 'Mutinies and Military Morale', in H. Strachan (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998), p. 192.

The Belgian execution ratio, proportionately to its manpower throughout the war, measured 0.0033%, which sat between the more lenient German figure of 0.00036% and the severe 0.00741% of the French.⁷⁶ Carrying out just 5.45% of its death sentences pronounced, actually compares rather favourably with the 10.82% of the British, the 32% of the Germans, the 35% of the French, and the 72.47% of the Italians.⁷⁷ Even allowing for variations in the size of their army, the Belgian soldier was relatively well protected. If anything, the intensity of executions during the 1914 campaign, both as a total of death sentences passed and with regard to the size of the army, might have placed Belgian soldiers at greater risk than men in other armies, but over the course of the war as a whole, and particularly after mid-1915, the risk of dying by capital punishment was greatly reduced.

Further studies have also shown that discipline during the First World War was comparable to the army's peacetime rates. It has been suggested that military courts sentenced approximately 2.24% of Belgian soldiers each year, which was substantially lower than the 3.6% average witnessed between 1900 and 1913.⁷⁸ The most common crimes tried by courts martial were insubordination and desertion, which combined, accounted for 84.4% of cases tried between 1914 and 1919.⁷⁹ While there are difficulties in establishing a precise yearly breakdown by offence because of the delay in bringing some cases to court, it is clear that the substantial increase in sentences for insubordination and desertion reflected the general sense of war-weariness from 1916 onwards that similarly pervaded

⁷⁶ A. Watson, 'Morale', in J. Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, Vol. II (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014), p. 179.

⁷⁷ For the British figures, see T. Bowman, *Irish Regiments in the Great War, Discipline and Morale* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2003), p. 13; for the Italians, see J. Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014), p. 363. The numbers for the French and Germans were calculated from figures in Engländer, 'Mutinies', p. 192. For more on British discipline during the First World War, see J. Putkowski and J. Sykes, *Shot at Dawn* (Wharncliffe Publishing, Barnsley, 1989); A. Babington, *For the Sake of Example: Capital Court Martials, 1914–18 the Truth* (Leo Cooper, London, 1983); C. Corns and J. Hughes-Wilson, *Blindfold and Alone: British Military Executions in the Great War* (Cassell & Co., London, 2001); G. Oram, *Military Executions during World War I* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2003).

⁷⁸ Simoens, 'Belgian military justice', p. 187; J. Gilissen, 'La juridiction militaire Belge de 1830 à nos jours', in *Actes du Colloque d'Histoire Militaire Belge (1830–1980)/Akten van het Colloquium over de Belgische Krijgsgeschiedenis (1830–1980)* (Musée Royal de l'Armée, Brussels, 1981), p. 474 (26–28 March 1980).

⁷⁹ Horvat, *Vervolging*, p. 131.

other armies.⁸⁰ From an average of 100.2 per month in 1916, Belgian desertions rose to 446.9 per month throughout 1917, and 555.6 per month in the first five months of 1918, with notable peaks during winter.⁸¹ However, the claim that discipline was particularly harsh in the Belgian Army based on such figures would be a mistake. Many cases were simply dealt with at regimental levels and thus did not show up in courts martial records. This had the effect of somewhat skewing the figures to show a disproportionate number of serious cases of insubordination and desertion whereas, in reality, discipline was relatively well maintained.⁸²

In his work on the German and British armies, Alexander Watson viewed the good disciplinary records of both forces as ‘evidence of the efficacy of their coercive mechanisms’.⁸³ This could equally be said of the Belgians, even during their more heavy-handed approach in 1914. More to the point, however, was the link Watson made between good discipline being a reflection of individual resilience, with as few as 4.58% of German soldiers and 5.7% of British soldiers receiving treatment for psychiatric illnesses during the war.⁸⁴ Between December 1914 and February 1918, some 2,374 Belgian soldiers were admitted to psychiatric institutions in France, translating to a comparable 6.5% of all men to pass through the army.⁸⁵ This would suggest that Belgian soldiers were not too dissimilar in this regard, managing to find ways to adapt to the intensely dislocating effects of disempowerment and deprivation, despite their poor reputation as a fighting force.

When it is considered that the vast majority of Belgian soldiers were equally forced to contend with the fact that their country was under occupation, the feat is all the more impressive.⁸⁶ Not only was there a lack of reliable information coming from behind the lines but also the Germans

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 132–133.

⁸¹ B. Benvindo, *Des Hommes en Guerre: Les Soldats Belges Entre Ténacité et Disillusion 1914–1918* (Archives Générales du Royaume, Brussels, 2005), pp. 77–78.

⁸² For more on disciplinary action at the regimental level, see Simoens, ‘Belgian military justice’, pp. 192–193; ‘Van arrangeren tot renseigneren. Smaad en geweld van militairen tegen hun oversten tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog’, *Cahiers d’Histoire du Temps Présent*, no. 23 (2011), pp. 15–53.

⁸³ Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, p. 43.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Benvindo, *Des Hommes en Guerre*, p. 61; Simoens, ‘Belgian military justice’, p. 195.

⁸⁶ For an accessible overview of Belgium during the First World War in English, see S. De Schaepdrijver, ‘Belgium’, in J. Horne (ed.), *Companion to World War I* (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2010), pp. 386–402.

refused to allow the operation of a postal service between Belgian soldiers and their families. Indeed, the Spanish Government was even approached in 1916 to act as an intermediary in the establishment of a correspondence network, although it appeared as if the Germans deliberately stalled its progress in order to 'sow despondency' in the Belgian ranks.⁸⁷ This was all the more effective when rumours were spread about German atrocities and mass deportations of Belgian civilians as the sense of helplessness could become unbearable.

Special measures were taken to keep men as informed as possible about their families and local events. Through various sources, lists of births, deaths, and marriages were collated and circulated on predesignated request cards that could satisfy a soldier's desire for such information. More than 100,000 letters of thanks were received in two years for this initiative, showing that morale was, above all, sustained by a constant stream of news. An exemplar, written by Sergeant Alphonse Dantine on 15 November 1916, stated:

It was for me a joyous day that one which, through your intermediary, I received a little word from our dear country. Therefore, accept our thanks and know that the appreciation of the Belgian soldier will be eternal, because the good that you bring us is without compare. One word, one word only from home, is enough to give us the necessary courage to fulfil our duty, courage that might sometimes be missing as a result of such difficult circumstances in which we live.⁸⁸

The establishment of the *Bureau de Correspondence* in Le Havre from December 1914 facilitated the circulation of correspondence to and from the neutral states, but not much more. Some men used this to write to pen pals, known as 'godmothers', in French and Dutch-speaking countries, with those from Canada said to have offered, 'apart from a few dollars, some excellent advice and comforting words'.⁸⁹ Soldiers wishing to at least try to make contact with home were forced to pay independent agents and smugglers whose success was not guaranteed. Increasingly stringent controls (for censorship purposes) firstly limited men to a maximum of three

⁸⁷ AER, POS. 1510/90-540, de Broqueville Papers, Beyens to de Broqueville, 23 September 1916.

⁸⁸ MRA, EX CDH 3768, Cabinet: Organisation of the *Sûreté Militaire Belge*, 1918.

⁸⁹ AER, POS. 1510/90-540, de Broqueville Papers, Letter to de Broqueville, 19 March 1917.

letters of no more than two pages per week (1915) and subsequently obliged them to use one of the official GQG or Ministry of War-recognised agencies and intermediaries (1917).⁹⁰

Although the lack of news could heighten anxiety, it also proved to be a source of great determination. A morale report from the *Censure Militaire Belge* in Folkestone in 1916 suggested that:

...morale remains excellent. Despite dashed hopes, the estrangement, the absence of regular news from their families left in the country, the mass deportations in operation in Belgium, the failures of the Rumanian troops which disconcerts them, in spite of the third winter to endure, Belgian soldiers have not for one instant ceased to believe in the possibility of seeing the war end in the current state of the military situation. No one appeals for peace, all aspire to fight. They are, despite everything, confident in the final victory. Following their favourite expression, 'they will hold'. We all have a quite clear impression that a suspension of hostilities in the current state of affairs will provoke an explosion of anger and perhaps violence. Each soldier lives only for vengeance and this, given the opportunity, will be terrible and ferocious.⁹¹

This reveals one of the single most important factors in understanding how an army on the strategic and operational defensive for the best part of four years could endure a war in which its suffering was exacerbated by the difficulties imposed by occupation. Belgium's defensive patriotism has been characterised by three themes: the land, King Albert, and a hatred of the enemy.⁹² But it was the latter, the craving for revenge, that sustained Belgian soldiers beyond all else.

Additional news of atrocities only reinforced the desire to see the job through, as documented by Sergeant Denis Jacquemin of the 9th LIR in response to news of the burning of Latour and the murder of 70 of its inhabitants:

Yes, it is for us soldiers, the sons of these unfortunate victims, the best, the most efficient of all the stimulants. The reports of the suffering, stoically endured by our parents, [...] have the effect of making us hate to the

⁹⁰ R. Christens and K. De Clerq, Frontleven 14/18. *Het Dagelijkse Leven van de Belgische Soldaat aan de IJzer* (Lannoo, Tirlemont, 1987), pp. 104–105.

⁹¹ AER, POS. 1510/90-540, de Broqueville Papers, Commandant de la Sûreté Militaire to de Broqueville, 7 December 1916.

⁹² Benvindo, *Des Hommes en Guerre*, p. 113.

extreme the common enemy. [...] It must not be forgotten that it is the lack of news of those we love that demoralises the soldier and not the privations of war.⁹³

While Jacquemin may have exaggerated or falsely generalised about matériel hardships, the powerful emotions of hatred and resentment aroused by the occupation cannot be underestimated. Clearly motivations among Frenchmen to avenge the defeat of 1870 was a powerful driving force, while Britain played on the rhetoric self-sacrifice to mobilise its citizen army for the struggle ahead.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, the realities of the situation confronting Belgian troops made fuelling this animosity essential to their success because to have removed the hope of retribution would have been akin to sapping their last vestiges of energy and desire for the fight.

The other immediate effect of the occupation on the unique war experience of Belgian soldiers was their inability to return home on leave. Rest, recuperation, and distancing oneself from the front, especially in the company of loved ones, was an important factor in sustaining morale because it gave soldiers something to look forward to. In contrast, the infrequency could have adverse effects. On average, German soldiers were released from the army only once a year, while British soldiers could only count on ten days of leave or, after November 1917, two weeks every 15 months.⁹⁵ The Belgian Army's leave policy was not too dissimilar. Each man was theoretically allowed a period of ten days each year, excluding the journey time. The problem was the absence of anywhere to go. As with British Colonial and Dominion forces, the pressures of facing up to how long a nonprofessional army could be expected to serve, in their case overseas, without leave was a pressing concern and perhaps the only analogous case to the Belgian soldier's plight.⁹⁶

⁹³ MRA, EX CDH 3768, Cabinet: Organisation of the *Sûreté Militaire Belge*, 1918; for more on German atrocities in Belgium, see Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914*; J. Horne, 'Atrocities and war crimes' in J. Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, Vol. I (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014), pp. 569–570 and 573–576; J. Lipkes, *Rehearsals: The German Army in Belgium, August 1914* (Leuven University Press, Leuven, 2007).

⁹⁴ Greenhalgh, *French Army*, p. xi; D. Englander, 'Discipline and morale in the British army, 1917–1918', in J. Horne (ed.), *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009), pp. 126–127.

⁹⁵ Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, p. 101.

⁹⁶ The Australians did not manage to send a draft home until September 1918. See, F. W. Perry, *The Commonwealth Armies: Manpower and Organisation in Two World Wars*

France and Britain offered alternatives to many Belgian soldiers whose families were not in the unoccupied portion of the country, but financial restrictions because of the expense of travel proved a limiting factor. This was particularly the case in the early years of the war when pay was low. Nevertheless, figures suggest that Belgian soldiers found it easier to enjoy periods of leave away from the frontlines as the war progressed.⁹⁷ A move to the French chevron system of pay, which rewarded time spent on the frontline as well as a 'combat indemnity', certainly helped ease matters as more soldiers got access to funds over time. Even so, some soldiers still struggled to meet the costs, prompting the King to fund up to 300 soldiers per month to sojourn in rest camps or civilian accommodation behind the lines.⁹⁸ Personal touches like these went a long way to maintaining the affection for the monarchy and its image as the protector of the nation. Despite their best efforts, though, some 12,694 men had still not obtained a single period of leave by the end of 1917. However, it is worth noting that some were also said to have refused it as a matter of principle, preferring to remain in the line.⁹⁹

Money was important to the average soldier to help ease the stresses of trench life through the purchasing of small comforts. The scarcity of food, which was brought up to the frontline just once in every 24 hours, was the cause of much distress while the overreliance on rice and beans became increasingly monotonous.¹⁰⁰ On the rare occasion when the *Intendance* obtained alternatives, such as a consignment of salted herring, it was distributed to the men with such frequency that it caused widespread nausea. The new *Ministre d'Intendance Civile et Militaire*, Émile Vandervelde (the leader of the Socialist party and the first to obtain a Cabinet post under the wartime coalition), found that, when touring the trenches, nine

(Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1988), pp. 158 and 222–223.

⁹⁷AER, POS. 1510/90-540, de Broqueville Papers, Undated tables regarding leave of troops, (probably 1918).

⁹⁸MRA, EX CDH 4362, General appraisal of the principal measures taken to improve the well-being, materiel and morale of the Belgian soldiers. 'Campaign 1914–1918', written by the General Staff of the Army, 1918.

⁹⁹AER, POS. 1510/90-540, de Broqueville Papers; undated tables regarding leave of troops (probably 1918).

¹⁰⁰Ibid., Commandant de la Sûreté Militaire to De Broqueville, 19 June 1917—Morale Report.

out of ten soldiers would refer to him as the ‘*Ministre des harengs salés*’.¹⁰¹ Moreover, the water brought up to the front frequently tasted of chlorine, which could detrimentally affect the flavour of coffee, resulting in a lowering of morale.¹⁰²

As a result, Belgian soldiers craved the luxuries only offered by independent vendors who, knowing the scarcity of food, charged exorbitant prices. From mid-1915 military shops were established to provide men with their desired goods without being fleeced for the privilege. Two officer shops, offering a wider range of more lavish products soon followed. The Belgian Army even established its own brewery after it was found that beer brewed locally in the unoccupied part of Belgium contained ‘*bacillus coli*’ from contaminated water that was making men sick.¹⁰³ The effort by the military authorities to make supplementary items more accessible and safer is a clear recognition of their importance to soldiers’ physical and mental well-being. Yet, despite obtaining relatively successful results, supply could never outweigh demand and the cost still proved high for many.

An alternative source of home comforts came by way of charity and, in particular, the Gifts for Belgian Soldiers initiative. From as early as 16 December 1914, when Vandervelde wrote an open letter on behalf of the Allies’ Relief Committee, appeals were made to the British people to donate, by subscription, money and goods to be shipped to the Belgian front. *The Times* called for one million gifts; in particular ‘promises of a gift of food once a week’ were welcomed.¹⁰⁴ Emotive tales of ‘the heroes of Liège’ suffering through winter tallied well with propagandist rhetoric of ‘gallant little Belgium’ and the sight of thousands of refugees across the country, to produce an empathetic reaction.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, by Christmas 1915, the Nottinghamshire Fund Committee alone appealed to supporters to surpass their 1914 total of 6,400 boxes,

¹⁰¹ É. Vandervelde, *Souvenirs d’un Militant Socialiste* (Les Éditions Denoël, Paris, 1939), p. 210.

¹⁰² MRA, Fonds IDA, 1351/66—Report on the state of troops from the point of view of morale and materiel, 29 July 1918.

¹⁰³ MRA, EX CDH 4362, General appraisal of the principal measures taken to improve the well-being, materiel, and morale of the Belgian soldiers. ‘Campaign 1914–1918’, written by the General Staff of the Army, 1918.

¹⁰⁴ *The Times*, 22 December 1914.

¹⁰⁵ Pennell, *Kingdom United*, pp. 127–129.

each containing a half pound of chocolate and 80 cigarettes.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, a sum of £8,000 from a Gifts for Belgian Soldiers fund arrived at GQG in August 1915 with the stipulation of being distributed to those with the least personal means to procure the small comforts required to ease their existence.¹⁰⁷ These donations had a great moral effect on the individual beneficiaries and the army at large, particularly at Christmas when the estrangement from family and friends was at its most poignant. Despite not being able to match the American Red Cross's offer of \$1,000,000 to be spent within the first month in order to strike 'an immediate impression [...] to show the Belgian soldiers that the US competition, was as usual, the biggest in the world', it was the first initiative of its kind and begun at a critical moment when the army required assistance following the Yser campaign.¹⁰⁸

After the army had reestablished itself, and the static nature of the war appeared firmly entrenched, the most prized gifts of all were those of a recreational nature. The sheer length of the war lent itself to men adopting a fatalistic attitude which, if not turned away from, could produce negative psychological effects leading to a disregard for safety and personal well-being.¹⁰⁹ With great support from Queen Elisabeth, books of all sorts were sent from neutral countries to fill the shelves of the rolling libraries that toured the front. Soldiers were given the opportunity of selecting one book each month that would then circulate through the company and subsequently between units. Close to 250,000 books were sent to the front over the course of the war, most of them in French, offering a truly impressive range. Vandervelde commented after the war how very Belgian it was to see that the most popular books were actually of a technical nature, noting: 'In the trenches, men were already thinking of a career after the war'.¹¹⁰ This was exemplified by the number of complaints that were lodged when there was a dearth of intellectual distraction, particularly in terms of books and discussions.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Nottinghamshire Fund Committee, *Xmas Gifts for Belgian Soldiers at the Front* (Nottingham, 1915).

¹⁰⁷ MRA, Fonds 1DA, 228/1, Note by A. Kenon, 8 August 1915.

¹⁰⁸ The American Red Cross contribution totalled more than \$7,000,000 by war's end. See Vandervelde, *Souvenirs*, pp. 211–212.

¹⁰⁹ Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, pp. 87–89.

¹¹⁰ Vandervelde, *Souvenirs*, pp. 212–213.

¹¹¹ MRA, CDH, Fonds GQG II Section, 118, Report on the morale of troops for the period 25 October 1917 to 25 November 1917.

Education had always been an important, though divisive issue, in Belgium and great efforts were made to improve the army's institutionalised regimental schooling for illiterates during the war. Many young men felt that they had had their secondary, higher, or professional education interrupted to answer the nation's call and had a right to demand a continuation of their tuition while under arms.¹¹² In a manner akin to that of the nineteenth century, the unwritten social contract of education for military service was again drawn on to keep the relationship between State and individual in harmony. Initially, a single division offered a range of classes across both the humanities and the sciences before it was extended to all divisions following its popularity and success. The *humanités anciennes* were composed of Latin, Greek, French, Flemish, English, German, History, Geography, Mathematics, and Natural Sciences. The *humanités modernes* were split into two sections: Commercial Sciences and Industrial Studies.

The problem facing the authorities was finding qualified personnel to teach the subjects. Such was the importance of the initiative that the army was combed out for men whose prewar positions lent themselves to teaching. Even though 29 academic doctors, 67 secondary school, and 1,789 primary school teachers were found through an examination of the available records, there were many more private instructors of which they knew nothing.¹¹³ Notwithstanding this, the level of education was deemed satisfactory enough for the Government to declare all degrees and qualifications obtained while in the army valid so as to ease the transition back into postwar civilian life. This was more than could be said of the degrees issued by the newly proclaimed Flemish University of Ghent (reopened on 24 October 1916 as part of Germany's *Flamenpolitik* policy), which were to be invalidated after the allied victory.¹¹⁴

More lighthearted, though no less important, was the supply of sporting equipment. The Gifts for Belgian Soldiers campaign was particularly prominent in providing footballs and boots to the front, recognising the

¹¹² MRA, EX CDH 4362, General appraisal of the principal measures taken to improve the well-being, materiel, and morale of the Belgian soldiers. 'Campaign 1914–1918', written by the General Staff of the Army, 1918.

¹¹³ AER, POS. 1510/90-540, de Broqueville Papers, Pouillet to de Broqueville, 18 September 1918.

¹¹⁴ For an overview of *Flamenpolitik* in occupied Belgium, see L. Wils, *Flamenpolitik en Aktivisme: Vlaanderen Tegenover België in de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Davidsfonds, Leuven, 1974).

long-standing culture in the British Army of using physical recreation to boost morale.¹¹⁵ Sport had begun to play a larger role in the Belgian Army as 1914 approached, with each regiment forming its own teams of footballers, gymnasts, and runners to compete in military tournaments. It took some time to convince senior military officials of its value, however, because many believed it would cause unnecessary fatigue and injuries. Some junior officers were more forthcoming and attempted to establish sporting initiatives as soon as the war of movement had ended. The benefits of having Flemings play alongside Walloons and officers alongside their men, all vying to achieve supremacy for their unit, were clear.¹¹⁶ The argument in favour of it was simple—war was a big sporting event that had to be won. Much as in peacetime where every effort was made to vanquish one's opponent to the better of one's cause, war too was played by the same principles. This was exemplified in the sporting trench newspaper, *L'Echo Sportif*, which wrote, '[t]o be a good soldier, one must be a good sportsman. It is a beautiful truth, which our soldiers and officers understand'.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, it took until late 1916 for the Minister of War to acknowledge the positive effects that sport might have by finally sanctioning the football and cross-country Military Championships to be reinstated at the front.¹¹⁸

King Albert, on the other hand, was a great proponent of such initiatives. He personally paid for the purchase of sporting equipment and, along with Queen Elisabeth, frequently attended matches to present prizes to the victors. On one occasion, these included five specially commissioned Swiss watches made from the metal of a Belgian 75-mm gun, complete with gold trimmings, inscription, and accompanying certificate of authenticity. Only 5,000 were made and were generally reserved for men who had distinguished themselves on the battlefield.¹¹⁹ It has been shown

¹¹⁵ T. Mason and E. Riedi, *Sport and the Military: The British Armed Forces 1880–1960* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010), pp. 80–111; J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914–1918* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1990), pp. 85–94; French, *Military Identities*, pp. 118–119; J. D. Campbell, 'The Army Isn't All Work': *Physical Culture and the Evolution of the British Army, 1860–1920* (Ashgate, Farnham, 2012).

¹¹⁶ *L'Indépendance Belge*, 14 November 1917.

¹¹⁷ MRA, At-14-XI-4 BOX 5, *L'Echo Sportif*, 15 October 1916.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10 December 1916.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, BOX 1, *Les bonnes nouvelles/Het goede nieuws*, September 1918. See also, Christens and De Clerq, *Frontleven*, pp. 117–120.

recently that Belgium's civilian army was at its most effective when men felt their sacrifice was 'valued and sanctified', with decorations adding great depth to the notions of honour that developed in the trenches.¹²⁰ The Royals recognised, more than others, the unifying effects of team-sports and the benefit such patronage could bring. Simultaneously, the added benefits of maintaining physical fitness through blowing off steam in the intense environment of the front were difficult to ignore.

From a strictly military point of view, however, sport was not seen as having the martial discipline or effectiveness of routine drills, marches, and fatigues. Many officers preferred tried-and-tested methods to keep their men in shape and distracted while out of the line. In his Order of the Day for 26 October 1915, for example, General Wielemans expressed his desire to see the army sharpen up its attitude towards military values, which he felt were severely lacking in comparison to other armies. He intended to place renewed emphasis on closed-rank exercises in order to foster a passive obedience to orders, increase the frequency of route marches, and inculcate respect by obliging soldiers to always salute officers unless they were in the front line.¹²¹ Such measures appeared unnecessary to the majority of troops who were still acclimatising to a prolonged period of military service. It was the source of much discontent in correspondence purely because of its futility and tiring nature during what were supposed to be periods of rest and recuperation.¹²²

As much as inequality in rations between ordinary soldiers and officers in the German Army eroded the relationship superiors had with their men, so did unwarranted exercises among the Belgians.¹²³ Officer-man relations, which proved so important in the maintenance of British morale, had for a long time been undermined in the Belgian military milieu by the perceived social and linguistic issues blocking the development of paternalism.¹²⁴ Yet, contempt was similarly expressed with regard to NCOs,

¹²⁰ R. Spijkerman, 'The Cross, Naturally': Decorations in the Belgian Army and Their Effect on Emotions, Behaviour and the Self, 1914–1918, *War in History* (forthcoming).

¹²¹ MRA, Fonds 1DA, 309/16, Annex to O.J.A. by Wielemans, 26 October 1915.

¹²² AER, POS. 1510/90-540, de Broqueville Papers, Commandant de la Sûreté Militaire to de Broqueville, 19 June 1917.

¹²³ H. Strachan, 'The morale of the German Army, 1917–18', in H. Cecil and P. Liddle (eds.), *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced* (Leo Cooper, London, 1996), p. 391.

¹²⁴ See G. Sheffield, 'Officer-Man Relations, Discipline and Morale in the British Army of the Great War', in H. Cecil and P. Liddle (eds.), *Facing Armageddon: The First World War*

whose constant presence alongside the men was disliked on account of their precise, often-unwavering application of the 'letter of the law'. The realist painter, Maurice Wagemans (1877–1927), wrote of his experience in the trenches to his friend and colleague Émile Claus in 1916, in which he describes the self-importance displayed by his superiors:

I beg your pardon for not having already written to you. It is not, I assure you, for want of thought, but I suffer so much here that I would have told you but sad things only. It is a difficult apprenticeship, that of a soldier, and I will not hide from you that it requires of me immense courage and will in order to endure. Here, one must completely forget one's being, the absolute sacrifice of one's individuality, because we are treated as pariahs by NCOs drunk with vulgarity. They are masters of the house. The commanders, the officers, turn a blind eye and seem very indifferent to everything that goes on.¹²⁵

He continued by claiming that endless fatigues, which saw him up from 05.30 until 18.00 each day, completed their misery and that it was all conducted under 'a reign of terror'.¹²⁶

Moreover, soldiers returning to Belgian lines from German prisoner of war (POW) camps were similarly shocked by the reception they received. After reaching the Belgian camp of Auvours in northern France, one man, who escaped from Germany at the fourth attempt, wrote:

I am happy to have got out, despite on the other hand regretting it at times. We think, when we are there, that we will be well received here by our compatriots; but no, it is rare to even get a hello, especially by the commanders, who tell us that we have to return to the front, which will be dangerous for us, as the Boches have our photographs and all the necessary information. If we were to be recaptured, we would be placed up against the wall. [...] Yes, in the camps over there, they told us that escapees were not well received in the Belgian Army; I did not want to believe it, but now I am certain.¹²⁷

The frequency with which such reports reached de Broqueville was alarming to say the least. Not only did it have negative effects on the morale of

Experienced (Leo Cooper, London, 1996), pp. 413–424.

¹²⁵ AER, POS. 1510/90-540, de Broqueville Papers, Wagemans to Claus, 1 January 1916.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, Barreley to Van der Essen, 15 September 1917.

those men who had made the arduous journey across occupied territories to do their duty, but equally gave further credence to the activist propaganda being disseminated in German camps. Some of them, such as Göttingen, were purposefully turned into politicising institutions where German sympathisers were gathered and imbued with *Flamenpolitik* to be disseminated among their comrades.¹²⁸ The fear that the Germans might deliberately release Belgian activists to rejoin the army was a worrying thought and not entirely unfounded. Their effect may have been limited, but in conjunction with German placards raised above the parapets bearing pictures of Belgian deserters with their families, it was no wonder that the authorities feared some Flemish soldiers might begin to question who exactly had their best interests at heart.¹²⁹

The Flemish question during the First World War has long been a source of historiographical debate. From the initial claims made by Raf Verhulst in 1917 that 80% of Belgian casualties in the war were Flemish, the idea that they were deliberately sacrificed by Walloon officers has become ingrained in the public consciousness. The proportion of Flemish soldiers in the army has proven difficult to accurately establish. Hans Keymulen and Luc De Vos have suggested that the split was roughly 69/31 in favour of the Flemish over the course of the war, with increasing parity in the technical arms.¹³⁰ Sophie de Schaepdrijver estimated it at around 65/35, while later figures by De Vos and Holmes intimated that there were as few as 59% Flemings in 1914; only marginally higher than their share of the population.¹³¹ These figures appear well-founded, despite the minor variables, as the recruitment process during the decades preceding 1914 would have lent

¹²⁸ For more on Belgian POWs in Germany, see R. Pöppinghege, 'Belgian Life behind German Barbed Wire', in S. Jaumain et al. (eds.), *Une Guerre Totale? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre Mondiale: Nouvelles Tendances de la Recherche Historique. Actes du Colloque International Organisé à l'ULB du 15 au 17 Janvier 2003* (Algemeen Rijksarchief—Archives Générales du Royaume, Brussels, 2005), pp. 207–220.

¹²⁹ MRA, EX CDH 3768, Report by Hymans for the Council of Ministers, 6 July 1918.

¹³⁰ See H. Keymulen and L. De Vos, 'Een Definitieve Afrekening met de 80%—Mythe? Het Belgische Leger (1914–1918) en de Sociale Numerieke Taalverhoudingen onder de Gesneuvelden van Lagere Rang', *Revue Belge d'Histoire Militaire*, vol. 27, no. 8 (1988), pp. 589–612; vol. 28, no. 1 (1989), pp. 1–37; and vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 81–104.

¹³¹ S. De Schaepdrijver, *De Groote Oorlog* (Atlas, Amsterdam & Antwerp, 1997), p. 189; L. De Vos and R. Holmes, *Langs Velden van eer: Belangrijke Plaatsen in de Eerste en de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Davidsfonds, Leuven, 2006), p. 50.

itself to a mildly higher proportion of Flemings joining through replacement and voluntary means. Similarly, the increase to approximately 65% of Flemings should come as no surprise. It must be remembered that the entirety of Wallonia was occupied from September 1914 until the Armistice. The only unoccupied spit of land defended by the Belgians was in Flanders, offering a small pool of manpower of almost exclusively Flemish speakers from which to draw. This is corroborated by Henri Bernard's figures that show the proportion of Flemish soldiers rising from 53% in 1914 to 63% by 1918.¹³²

The promulgation of the idea that disproportionately high Flemish casualties were sustained has quite naturally proved a contentious point and a battleground for postwar separatist claims. Attempts by the likes of F. E. Stevens and Luc Schepens to revise the 80% myth have only further obfuscated the debate through inconsistent and fundamentally flawed methodology. The former's sample was constructed solely around one regiment that was predominantly recruited in Brussels, while the latter based his findings on the records of ten cemeteries in Flanders that failed to take into account the costly battles in Antwerp and Liège or the fact that many Walloon soldiers were exhumed after the war and reburied locally.¹³³ Schepens' estimation that 67.94% of casualties were Flemish still appeared a gross overestimation to Keymulen and De Vos whose methodological integrity steered them towards a suggestion of no more than 59.28%.¹³⁴ The idea that the Flemish-dominated infantry were used as cannon-fodder was dispelled by their extrapolation of data from the official casualties list published by the *Moniteur Belge*. They argued that the army, without considering the place of death, saw a casualty rate of 64.31% Flemish and 35.69% Walloon. Alternatively, a more precise calculation based on the fighting army alone, whose deaths were recorded in Belgium, France, or Britain, demonstrated that only 54.9% were Flemish, 26.6% Walloon, and 9.9% bilingual. Furthermore,

¹³² H. Bernard, *L'an 14 et la Campagne des Illusions* (La Renaissance de Livre, Brussels, 1982), p. 56.

¹³³ F. E. Stevens, 'De Samenstelling van het 9 de Linieregiment tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog (1914–1918)', *Revue Belge d'Histoire Militaire*, pp. 681–722. For more on Belgian First World War burial practices and its role in the formation of identity, see K. D. Shelby, 'National identity in First World War Belgian military cemeteries', *First World War Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2015), pp. 257–276.

¹³⁴ L. Schepens, *Albert I et le Gouvernement Broqueville 1914–1918* (Duculot, Paris-Gembloux, 1983), p. 58; Keymeulen and De Vos, 'Definitieve', vol. 28, no. 2, p. 97.

their figures for 1915–1918 highlighted the ‘Flemishisation’ of the Yser Army by contending that 68.81% of men who died in Flanders were of Flemish origin compared to 31.19% Walloon.¹³⁵ This may well have given the impression that an above-average number of Flemings were being killed during the war; however, in reality the ratio was in line with their proportion of the army.

How the Flemish question had an impact on the effectiveness and workings of the army during the war itself is a different matter altogether. For decades there had been an assumption that Flemish soldiers had been discriminated against by their Walloon superiors because of the language barrier. These injustices had been recognised and were in the process of being modified by an equality of language law due to come into effect in 1917. As with many other aspects of the Belgian military organisation, the outbreak of war interrupted the process and seemingly created an unsavoury situation whereby command and control was compromised by misunderstanding and continued officer–man friction. Yet, recent scholarship has shown that this was not at all the case and certainly did not lead to the same problems of desertion and ineffectiveness as seen with Czech or Ruthene troops in the Austro-Hungarian Army.¹³⁶ Through life in the trenches and time spent in French rest camps and hospitals, Flemish soldiers picked up a rudimentary understanding of the language. Indeed, French military expressions formed a veritable *lingua franca* of the army.¹³⁷ Moreover, most NCOs, who often adopted leadership roles during combat, were bilingual and would repeat the order in both French and Flemish to avoid confusion. Only one example in Horvat’s study of courts martial records revealed a Flemish soldier’s claim to not have understood the orders given to him in French.¹³⁸

Of course, this is not to say that there was no desire among Flemish soldiers to be commanded in their own language. Demands were made to this end from as early as December 1915.¹³⁹ These were sporadic and individualistic in nature, however, and consequently generated little response. More concerted efforts in 1917, involving organised campaigns with

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 96.

¹³⁶ N. Stone, *The Eastern Front, 1914–1917* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1985), pp. 126–127.

¹³⁷ De Schaepdrijver, *Groote Oorlog*, p. 183.

¹³⁸ Horvat, *Vervolging*, p. 55.

¹³⁹ Ibid., pp. 56–57.

Flemish slogans repeated throughout the army, were much more powerful. Censors found increasing references to linguistic matters in private correspondence, while open letters expressing grievances also appeared with greater frequency.¹⁴⁰

One infamous letter, addressed to the King on 11 July 1917—the anniversary of the Battle of the Golden Spurs—asked for the establishment of separate Flemish and Walloon armies alongside a Flemish Government seated in Flanders.¹⁴¹ These demands uncomfortably resembled processes being undertaken in occupied Belgium, which saw the administrative separation of the country take place on 21 March 1917 and the recognition of the *Raad van Vlanderen* (The Flemish Council) by the Germans on 15 February 1918. Nevertheless, the military authorities had to be particularly sensitive to the difference between loyal *Flamingants* campaigning for Flemish rights within a unified Belgium and Germanophile activists seeking postwar political separation. This was of the highest importance to the Government that was eager to ensure that no such confusion be made through the press or idle talk.¹⁴² It is significant to note that some leading *Flamingant* intellectuals had refused to collaborate in occupied Belgium, demonstrating a loyalty to the concept of a wider Belgian identity and reinforcing the notion that not all activists ought to be tarnished with the same brush.¹⁴³ To highlight this fact, intellectuals, such as Camille de Bruyns, Paul Frédérickem, and Louis Franck, could all be found in German prisons having branded themselves anti-aktivists, with a ‘k’ to discriminate between their prewar ideals and that of the pan-Germanism that was now in force in occupied territory.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ MRA, CDH—118 Fonds GQG II Section, Report on the morale of troops for the period 25 July 1917 to 25 August 1917.

¹⁴¹ Horvat, *Vervolging*, p. 58. For a full transcription, see T. Hermans et al. (ed.), *The Flemish Movement: A Documentary History 1780–1990* (Athlone Press Ltd., London, 1992), pp. 227–237.

¹⁴² AER, POS 1510/82-485, de Broqueville Papers, de Broqueville to Marsily [unknown] August 1917.

¹⁴³ For more on the intellectual response to the invasion, see H. Pirenne, *Belgium and the First World War* (trans. V. Capelle and J. Lipkes; The Brabant Press, Wesley Chapel, FL, 2014), p. 204; J. Horne, ‘Belgian intellectuals and the German invasion, 1914–1915’, in S. Jaumain et al. (eds.), *Une Guerre Totale? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre Mondiale: Nouvelles Tendances de la Recherche Historique. Actes du Colloque International Organisé à l’ULB du 15 au 17 Janvier 2003* (Algemeen Rijksarchief—Archives Générales du Royaume, Brussels, 2005), pp. 391–404.

¹⁴⁴ *L’Indépendance Belge*, 24 May 1918.

On 4 August 1917, Armand De Ceuninck was appointed the new Minister of War to curb the unrest in the army. He instituted a series of measures to ensure that officers were appointed from both regions. De Ceuninck himself spoke fluent Flemish and used it in speeches to the troops. By 15 September 1917, De Ceuninck acknowledged the right of Flemish soldiers to demand that their superiors spoke Flemish, and encouraged all officers to learn the language. Still, he also warned that the army could now no longer tolerate a political agenda. Propagandists were treated as accomplices of the German oppressor and dealt with accordingly through being distanced from the front by imprisonment or labour-intensive work with the Disciplinary Companies.¹⁴⁵ However, change was slow as officers failed, or refused, to adapt. Much like the prewar attempts to foster closer links with their men, officers were at a loss as to which Dutch to learn. Even Flemish intellectuals struggled with their fellow Flemings in the ranks, whose regional dialects were so diverse and different from the standardised language as to make communication impossible. As such, many rest camps and hospitals retained everything in French or adopted English as an operative language.¹⁴⁶

In some cases, there was even a Walloon backlash. Many rankers were frustrated at the attention given to the *Flamingants* and angered at the prospect of being forced to learn Flemish; a language considered useless outside of Flanders.¹⁴⁷ In a conflict that largely saw Flemings and Walloons set aside their differences and regional affiliations for the good of the nation, the agitation in 1917 and 1918 was a timely reminder that local identities remained prominent in the understanding of 'Belgianness'. Trench newspapers were a good example of this. They appear to have been specifically designed to nurture and reinforce the much-cherished connection between the individual and his locality by targeting readers from a given area. For example, the *Amons nos Autes* newspaper printed stories about Liège and deeds of various *Liègeois* in the army to enable men to

¹⁴⁵ B. Amez, 'Maintenir ou éloigner du front? Le dilemme des autorités militaires belges face aux délinquants militaires au cours de la guerre 14–18: le cas des compagnies spéciales', in M. De Koster et al. (eds.), *Justice in Wartime and Revolutions: Europe, 1795–1950/Justice en Temps de Guerre et Révolutions: Europe, 1795–1950* (Algemeen Rijksarchief, Brussels, 2012), pp. 117–134.

¹⁴⁶ Horvat, *Vervolging*, p. 59.

¹⁴⁷ MRA, CDH—118 Fonds GQG II Section, Reports on the morale of troops for the period 25 October 1917 to 25 November 1917 and 25 August 1918 to 25 September 1918.

reconnect with their roots and their comrades spread across various regiments. More notably, in the context of the linguistic question, it even ran writing competitions in the Walloon dialect as opposed to French to show the *Liègeois* attachment to ‘*la petite patrie*’.¹⁴⁸ Having been established in October 1915, the newspaper reported in just its 16th issue on 15 May 1916 that it had surpassed 2,000 subscriptions—boldly claiming to have become the leading newspaper for the majority of *Liègeois* in the army.¹⁴⁹

Each locality could boast its own publication, though more general trench newspapers, appealing to a wider audience through bilingual editions, were also available. In many cases military chaplains were heavily involved on the editorial boards to ensure a ‘highbrow’ approach was taken. They wished to reflect some officer-edited French or officially sanctioned German examples and to avoid the troop-led ‘smut’ often found in rankers’ publications.¹⁵⁰ This saw a heavy influence of religious content, which before the war may have caused annoyance among some. Belief in divine providence, however, had risen substantially in the army since 1914, requiring an expansion in the number of military chaplains from 53 to a grand total of 572 by war’s end.¹⁵¹ This even included 11 Protestant chaplains, under the direction of Pierre Blommaert, supporting the needs of a minority 3,000 men in the Belgian Army.¹⁵² Although it is difficult to quantify the number of men who practised their faith during the war or for what purpose, it is highly likely that faith helped even those with the most minimal convictions to endure the war. As in other armies, the importance of carrying objects believed to possess supernatural powers of safety and deliverance, be it bibles, amulets, or even letters and pictures from home, ‘returned responsibility for personal fate to the individual, negating the damaging feelings of disempowerment arising from the front’s objective uncontrollability’.¹⁵³ By carrying these items or praying during combat, soldiers felt that their

¹⁴⁸ MRA, At-14-XI-4 BOX 1, *Amon nos Autes*, no. 24, 15 September 1916.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 16, 15 May 1916.

¹⁵⁰ S. Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War, 1914–1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War* (Berg, Oxford & Washington, DC, 1992), pp. 3 and 9–10; Fuller, *Troop Morale*, p. 14.

¹⁵¹ J. R. Leconte, *L’Aumônerie Militaire Belge: Son Évolution de l’Époque Hollandaise à l’Organisation Actuelle* (Musée Royal de l’Armée et d’Histoire Militaire, Brussels, 1967), p. 88.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁵³ Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, p. 99.

fate lay in their own hands; that, should they forget them, death or dismemberment was a likely outcome of their own doing. As such, the value of chaplains at the centre of the battalion was critical for the Belgian Army. By accompanying men into battle and being ever present in their lives, they assumed a great moral prestige that helped make them a 'precious auxiliary to authority'.¹⁵⁴

The respect they commanded from the men through their presence and aid in recreational activities also placed chaplains at the forefront of Flemish activism.¹⁵⁵ Suspicions concerning their involvement were particularly rife given their ability to hold seemingly innocent congregations of attentive audiences—the majority of which were composed of Flemish Catholics.¹⁵⁶ Leconte has argued that these were false, postwar, accusations based exclusively on information garnered from *Le XXe Siècle*, which had performed an uninterrupted campaign against the influence of chaplains since 1916 and therefore should be disregarded.¹⁵⁷ Although it certainly cannot be claimed that all chaplains were activists, the likes of Cyrile Verschave's authorship and distribution of the *Flemish Nationalist's Catechism* in March 1918 was a clear indication of direct involvement. In a question-and-answer format, this pamphlet set out radical aims for the Flemish people to take back what the Belgian political system had denied them.¹⁵⁸ Official reports, too, placed intellectuals and educated men (among whom chaplains could be counted) at the centre of the agitation.¹⁵⁹ King Albert, himself, recognised this fact when he wrote: 'This movement is supported by a propaganda systematically organised by numerous intellectuals'.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, reports from soldiers on leave claimed that chaplains were without question the greatest proponents of *Flamingantism*, circulating the trenches saying 'Speek vlaamsch' (speak Flemish) in an aggressive

¹⁵⁴ MRA, EX CDH 4362, General appraisal of the principal measures taken to improve the well-being, materiel, and morale of the Belgian soldiers. 'Campaign 1914–1918', written by the General Staff of the Army, 1918.

¹⁵⁵ Shelby, *Flemish Nationalism*, pp. 77–78.

¹⁵⁶ MRA, CDH – 118 Fonds GQG II Section, Report on the morale of troops for the period 25 August 1917 to 25 September 1917.

¹⁵⁷ Leconte, *L'Aumônerie*, pp. 80–81.

¹⁵⁸ Hermans, *Flemish Movement*, pp. 240–253.

¹⁵⁹ MRA, CDH—118 Fonds GQG II Section, Report on the morale of troops for the period 25 November 1917 to 25 December 1917; MRA, EX CDH 3768, Report by Hymans for the Council of Minister, 6 July 1918.

¹⁶⁰ RA, Fonds A.E.—35, Note by King Albert I, 20 March 1918.

manner.¹⁶¹ Their influence in the writing and distribution of seditious material was significant in changing the nature and scale of the agitation from local disturbances to an army-wide campaign.

The impact of reading material was particularly feared for its ability to question the reasons for which the Entente Powers were fighting. Articles concerning Ireland in *Ons Vaderland*, published in Calais, and *De Belgische Standaard*, published in De Panne, provided two such examples. Without directly comparing Ireland and Flanders, they analysed and explained the nationalist insurrection, the opposition of the Catholic clergy to conscription, and the significance of the Sinn Fein movement. Eight articles on the subject appeared in *De Belgische Standaard* between 8 and 22 May, and two in *Ons Vaderland* in their issues of 17–18 May and 23 May 1918. The authors signed off ‘O’Flanders’ in the former and ‘Patrick Fleming’ in the latter to further emphasise the point.¹⁶² A few weeks previously *Ons Vaderland* wrote an article entitled ‘*La Belgique par-dessus tout*’, asserting that the principle that ‘the nation first and foremost’ was, above all, false and constituted heresy as, for a Catholic, God and religion trumped all.¹⁶³ At a time when the French socialists were preaching the nation above all else, Belgian soldiers were being told to forsake the nation in favour of divinity. It is little wonder, therefore, that chaplains were seen as stoking the agitation that not only threatened to undermine the army’s discipline but also the very fabric of Belgian unity and nationalism.

The culmination of the Flemish movement came in March 1918 when a series of ‘strikes’, as David Englander termed them, saw coordinated demonstrations by the now 5,000 strong Front Party (Flemish activists) members.¹⁶⁴ They were nonviolent in nature but powerful in sentiment. Groups of 100 to 400 men would gather for no more than half an hour during the night displaying Flemish slogans in an act of solidarity.¹⁶⁵ Technically speaking, their actions could not be classified as mutiny as no orders were directly disobeyed. The men involved would readily disperse to rejoin their units and continue the fight, which set them slightly

¹⁶¹ *L’Indépendance Belge*, 26 June 1918.

¹⁶² MRA, EX CDH 3768, Report by Hymans for the Council of Minister, 6 July 1918.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Englander, ‘Mutinies’, pp. 197–198. Karen Shelby prefers the term ‘soft mutiny’ as the perpetrators still carried of insubordination against the army’s authority—see, *Flemish Nationalism*, p. 86.

¹⁶⁵ Schepens, *Albert*, p. 198.

apart from some of the French cases in 1917 where demands had to be met before those involved agreed to take up arms again.¹⁶⁶

Nevertheless, there were fears that matters might escalate, particularly given the indecision that appeared to reign in the Cabinet concerning the best method of dealing with the situation. King Albert was particularly concerned, writing at some length:

[T]he Flemish question in the army has already been on numerous occasions the order of the day and despite its laborious deliberations, the Government has not been able to agree on what course to take. [...] In the face of recrudescing propaganda and the manifestations in favour of Flemish, there is reason to fear that discipline might one day be compromised. The duty of the Chief of the General Staff and the military authorities is to maintain, at all costs, discipline in the army. The duties of the Government are of a higher order, they consist of researching the causes of the movement and to determine what can be done in the way of appeasement and harmony. It is important that the sovereignty is no longer divided on the Flemish question in the army. [...] There are reciprocal concessions to be made. If not, if you leave things to go on, a situation might arise that necessitates an inexorable repression to re-establish order. Would you be unanimous in the current state of affairs to support and approve it? [...] In systematically keeping silent over the aspirations of those Flemings who are even with us, who spill their blood in the trenches, limiting themselves to good-willed protests; do you not think that they would wish us to understand by ourselves that, [...] rightly or wrongly, only agitation can modify what is perceived as our indecision if not our hostility?¹⁶⁷

The Government had intended, as best as possible, to stay clear of making firm commitments to Flemish legislation up to this point. They had believed that whatever agitation there was in the army was purely isolated and not in danger of such a conflagration. When they were finally faced with mass-unrest, the Cabinet's immediate reaction was one of repression, but as suggested earlier, the King was not convinced that this was the solution.¹⁶⁸ If anything, the Flemish soldiers campaigning for their rights within the framework of liberal Belgium had a point.

¹⁶⁶ L. V. Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1994), p. 183; Greenhalgh, *French Army*, p. 202.

¹⁶⁷ RA, Fonds A.E.—35, Note by King Albert I, 20 March 1918.

¹⁶⁸ Horvat, *Vervolging*, p. 61; Schepens, *Albert*, pp. 179–180.

Part of the problem was that there was a fundamental misunderstanding over the motives and aims of the movement. This was partly on account of the various degrees of activism present within it. The more restrained portions sought no more than a realignment of Flemish alongside French within an independent Belgium, while the Radicals questioned the concept of Belgium as an entity.¹⁶⁹ The King even received demands from both Flemings and a few Walloons to have the army split along those lines into two separate institutions. Naturally, King Albert unequivocally refused to entertain any such suggestion, commenting:

I declare that I cannot assume, as Commander-in-Chief, the responsibility of such a reform in the face of the enemy. No one can say what may happen but I have the feeling, if not the certainty, that the Walloons would not submit passively. The officers, notably, would be profoundly troubled and I cannot answer for their attitude nor for their actions. I will also highlight that we would not have, and would be far from having, the necessary cadres. One does not improvise on campaign, at a critical moment like today, such profound and radical modifications.¹⁷⁰

This was not only prudent militarily but also demonstrated a strength of character that came to define Albert's command and reign during the Great War. Ever the pragmatist, it made little sense to ignore the frustrations being aired by his troops and subjects, and even less sense to act against the best interests of the nation. After all, the army still needed to hold its portion of the line in the face of the German Spring Offensives to have any say at the peace table should victory be achieved. The aggressive politicking by some Front Movement members was but a tool used to advance their cause. Its leaders emanated from the Catholic Right and would never have incited revolution. Even the Socialist movement on the Yser failed to mobilise after the Russian February Revolution in 1917 and was only mildly agitated by events in October, suggesting that coordinated efforts from the bottom were never a realistic proposition.¹⁷¹

Indeed, the intensity of the war in the spring of 1918 helped contain the situation for the Belgians, while the subsequent reestablishment of

¹⁶⁹ MRA, CDH—118 Fonds GQG II Section, Report on the morale of troops for the period 25 October 1917 to 25 November 1917.

¹⁷⁰ RA Fonds A.E.—35, Note by King Albert I, 20 March 1918.

¹⁷¹ Benvindo, *Des Hommes en Guerre*, pp. 72–73.

the war of movement during the Hundred Days, which saw the Belgian Army take to the offensive to liberate their country, proved to be the perfect tonic to raise eroding morale. It demonstrates the ephemeral nature of the agitation, which although based on real desires and prewar social anxieties, never sought to undermine the ability of the army to perform its primary role of asserting its continued existence and independence. In this sense, there is a certain truth in the assertion made by Aloys Van de Vyvere, the Minister of Finance, in July 1918 when opposing a counterpropaganda idea by Hymans to combat the Flemish movement. He stated: 'Mr Hymans' propaganda would be complete if it were true that there were neither Flemings, nor Walloons, that there were only Belgians. Undoubtedly, it must be that there are only Belgians, but these Belgians—with the exception of a small minority who would be wrong to assume they were more complete Belgians than others—wish, as is their right, to remain Flemings and Walloons'.¹⁷² It reveals an intimate appreciation of the Belgian connection to nationalism through regional roots. Whereas there were those who could claim to be Belgian without recourse to further qualification, there were others who adopted a Flemish concept of Belgian identity and others a Walloon concept. Perhaps, this could be localised even further. Ultimately, however, most soldiers who went to war had a shared identity from two different sources that manifestly expressed itself in the dogged defence of their country under the most trying of circumstances.

The Flemish movement, simply put, was one expression trying to attain parity with the other, only boiling over when war-weariness caught up with the Belgians as it had already done with most of the other belligerent nations. Indeed, it has even been shown that Flemish nationalism in the postwar years needed an origin to validate its interwar agenda, which was to be belatedly found in the troubles of 1918 despite their relatively limited goals.¹⁷³ Even the annual pilgrimage to the Yser front from 1920 and the erection of the Flemish Tower in Diksmuide in 1930 reflected postwar sentiments more than wartime divisions. Its significance to memory and symbolic relevance was further heightened when the

¹⁷² MRA, EX CDH 3768, Response by Van de Vyvere, Minister of Finance to Hymans' Report, 6 July 1918.

¹⁷³ B. De Wever, *Greep naar de Macht. Vlaams-Nationalisme en Nieuwe Orde. Het VNV 1933–1945* (Uitgeverij Lannoo, Tielt, 1994), p. 28.

latter was suspiciously blown up in 1946.¹⁷⁴ It continues to hold substantial relevance for Flemish sentiment to this day.¹⁷⁵

The First World War ended what really was a long nineteenth century for Belgium. The many social and political tensions that had dominated the civilian milieu and overflowed into its military counterpart were exposed as German boots crossed the border on 4 August 1914. The army itself was in a poor state. Its organisation was in turmoil following a series of changes that saw men from four separate recruiting systems called up to defend the nation. The majority were reservists with little meaningful military experience to draw on, while the equipment at their disposal was similarly unprepared for the nature of modern warfare. Notwithstanding the odds stacked against it, the Belgian Army succeeded, in many respects, in fulfilling its role and the country's obligations by stoically committing itself to a costly defensive action from the Meuse to the Yser. Anglophone historiography has generally viewed Belgium as simply the geographical location where part of the First World War took place. Nevertheless, the steadfast and pragmatic decision making of King Albert, which was often misconstrued as stubborn incompetence, demonstrated the agency and role of a nation that was fully intent on making its presence felt. Indeed, it was paramount; for in the tenacity of the army on the Yser for four years, the existence of Belgium endured. Although help was at hand, the importance of the 1914 campaign, which saw the Belgian Army retain a portion of its territory under its own sovereignty, was essential in providing its men and its occupied civilians with the fortitude to sustain themselves amid the most trying of circumstances.

The ability to endure the war was as much a top-down conundrum as it was an individual effort. Disciplinary measures to keep an ailing army in the field were a necessary response to the crisis of 1914; during that time seven of the 12 Belgian military executions took place. Following the establishment of static warfare and the passing of the immediate danger, the army realised that the coercive methods were of secondary importance in the maintenance of morale and swiftly altered their approach to include more supportive measures. The military authorities began a slow process of refitting the army and providing it with as many comforts as were made available to them. Yet, despite this, recourse to charity in providing materi-

¹⁷⁴ Shelby, *Flemish Nationalism*, pp. 7–11 and 14–16; Benvindo, *Des Hommes en Guerre*, p. 72; I.F.W. Beckett, *The Great War, 1914–1918* (Pearson, Harlow, 2007), p. 613.

¹⁷⁵ For more, read in full Shelby, *Flemish Nationalism*.

als for recreation was equally important. Education and sport played a huge role in creating positive distractions for a largely citizen force that had always felt detached from its army. The unifying effects of sport and better prospects in a postwar world through qualifications (both heavily supported directly by the monarchy) had a great impact on the lives of the individuals who were able to benefit.

Nonetheless, discord threatened to undermine the supportive mechanisms put in place. The Flemish movement, which gathered pace as of the winter of 1917–1918 and the accompanying war-weariness, was a potentially catastrophic development that might have ended Belgium's participation in the war and by extension its continued existence as an independent sovereign state. Still, its motivations and aims were far less radical than its postwar incarnation. Most Flemings still believed themselves to be Belgian, despite their deep-rooted affection for their respective localities and traditions. Indeed, they were no different from their Walloon counterparts in this respect. Their grievance was more with the lack of appreciation from some quarters that a Flemish interpretation of Belgian identity could have parity with a Walloon one despite the dominance of the French language in the country. To a degree, the demonstrations were a reaffirmation of the fact that they did consider themselves Belgian and were prepared to fight alongside the Walloons to rid their country of the invader, the 'other', with whom they certainly had nothing in common. In this sense, the words of Hew Strachan that 'as Belgium lost its territory it found an identity' have proven to be particularly perceptive.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ Strachan, *To Arms*, p. 159.

Conclusion

Throughout the period under consideration it is evident that the Belgian Army failed in its task as a tool of nation-building in a linguistically, culturally, and politically fractured society. The armed forces played a significant role in securing the nation during the turbulent years immediately after independence, but they struggled to exert a unifying influence beyond this. The ramifications of decades' worth of social debates that emanated from competing identifications with the country and its political institutions significantly undermined the military capabilities of the army, charged primarily with the task of upholding neutrality. Yet, in many ways, it reflected the society from which it was drawn. The deep-rooted antimilitarism that came to define public and political reactions to the army were very much in evidence through the relegation of military issues behind those of a social nature. Chief among these was that of language, which came increasingly to define local identities within society as well as the army itself. In a country in which revolution in 1830 had spawned from predominantly economic considerations, such splintering towards parochialisms is not surprising.¹ It reinforced the dichotomy between centre and periphery in a rapidly industrialising country. The effect was to define the Catholic and Liberal Parties' relationship with both army and society. By pandering

¹E. Witte, *La Construction de la Belgique, 1828–1847* (Éditions Complexe, Brussels, 2005), pp. 41–42.

to the desires of the small, but powerful electorate, to reduce the military burden, political interference consistently plagued the army's attempts to prepare for the task at hand. This resulted in a militarily ineffective force taking the field in 1914. Nevertheless, while it might have been expected to collapse in the face of overwhelming force, the army and the nation found a resolve to endure the trials of a modern war for which it was not prepared. When faced with 'the other' against which to define itself, Belgium's parallel identities converged within a wider concept of the nation that allowed it to largely set aside its prewar divisions to fight towards a common purpose.

Be it confronting the Dutch Army during the Ten Days' Campaign or the Orangist counterrevolution, Belgium's armed forces played a central role in securing the nation. Although recognised by the Great Powers in 1831, the future of the new liberal regime, under the stewardship of King Leopold I, was far from assured throughout the 1830s. Loyalties were split among some sections of the industrial bourgeoisie, nobility, and officer corps, who visibly saw the advantages they had enjoyed under Dutch rule swept away by the Revolution. This led them into the clutches of the Orangist movement. 'Nationalism' is too strong and unifying a term to characterise the sentiments expressed by the commercial bourgeoisie and working classes, but devotion to the Belgian ideal in an anti-Dutch capacity was certainly in evidence. Aside from a minority of officers, both the regular army and the Civic Guard displayed incredible zeal and loyalty towards the nascent State. Occasionally, as in the case of the anti-Orangist riots of 1834, the dispensing of public justice probably went too far. As the army grew in strength as a reliable institution, however, the effect of Orangism began to wane. Formerly disaffected officers were welcomed into the fold as the nation stabilised after the signing of the 1839 Treaty of London brought with it peace and neutrality. From this point on, social and political issues would come to dominate the relationship between army and society as Belgium struggled to find a corporate identity.

Even at the top of the military establishment, defining a military identity proved troublesome. The officer corps began its search for professionalisation by incorporating high-ranking French and Polish officers to fill the void left by returning Belgian officers whose careers had been stunted while in Dutch service. Even though it certainly became more Belgian as the nineteenth century progressed, issues of language, religion, and politics threatened to undermine the martial spirit inculcated by the

increasingly influential *École Militaire*. Political interference in these matters bore much of the responsibility. Pro-French legislation, for example, ensured that a disproportionate number of French-speaking officers persisted throughout the century. Flemish-speakers retained a presence, but became increasingly bilingual in pursuit of professional opportunities. This reflected a wider social trend in Flanders among the lower-middle classes competing for managerial positions, which helped ignite the resolve of the *Flamingant* movement's quest for linguistic parity by the turn of the twentieth century.²

However, concerns over career progression among all officers grew as promotion rates slowed. Lengthening seniority lists coupled with corruption and patronage caused disillusionment among conscientious and ambitious officers. Suggestions that the officer corps had become insular were somewhat justified in this respect, although claims of exclusivity emanating from a military class were exaggerated. The healthy number of commissions granted to noncommissioned officers (NCOs), which reflected a continuation of the revolutionary spirit of equal opportunity, bore testament to that. Nevertheless, disenchantment with the system prompted many ambitious officers to sell out to the commercial opportunities in the Congo during the 1880s. This left the officer corps with a limited number of career officers at its disposal and revealed, above anything else, the slow unravelling of professionalism that had been so highly valued in the army's formative years.

Political interference in the recruitment of the rank and file was even more pronounced than in the officer corps. The obvious failings of the ballot system that allowed the wealthier sections of society to escape the military charge undermined the army's dual role of national defence and as an instrument of unification. In place of the desired intelligent class of recruit, the substitutes and replacements furnished proved detrimental to discipline and efficiency. Moreover, the ballot ensured that the army was not a true reflection of society in terms of its social composition. Only after the 1886 workers riots did the bourgeoisie willingly begin to send their sons into the army as a counterweight to proletariat influence. The militarisation process had begun among the middle classes, though it

² B. De Wever, 'The case of the Dutch-speaking Belgians in the nineteenth century', in P. Broomans et al. (eds.), *The Beloved Mothertongue: Ethnolinguistic Nationalism in Small Nations: Inventories and Reflections* (Peeters, Leuven, Paris & Dudley, MA, 2008), pp. 55–56.

had still not fully matured by 1914. Politically, however, neither Catholics nor Liberals could afford to endorse the calls for personal and obligatory service emanating from senior officers, for fear of alienating the small electorate who were the main beneficiaries of replacement. Indeed, a succession of Catholic ministries from 1884 onwards were elected on promises of reducing the military burden. This included reducing time spent under arms as well as fiscal frugality. It was a further demonstration of the power of local over national interests.

In place of short-service conscription along the Prussian model, anti-militaristic pressure succeeded in convincing the Government to waive the advice of the 1901 Commission and to implement voluntary recruitment instead. Skeletal units between 1902 and 1909, coupled with a change in the Catholic Party leadership, saw the first step towards achieving universal conscription. A more national army was established through the abolition of replacement, as the one son per family law was introduced as a stepping-stone towards a more capable military force. In 1913 this was extended to general service that sought to raise the wartime establishment from 100,000 to 340,000 men by 1925. Yet, as a corollary to the disaffected wings of the Catholic Party's Flemish representatives, regional recruitment supplanted the national system that had hoped to create a 'melting pot' from which to extract a collective unity.³ It demonstrated the failure of the army to break the strong regional bonds of the individual through what had been a largely defective system of recruitment.

Beyond the system itself, the unwritten social contract between communities and the State was deemed to be a one-sided issue. The youth of the nation was compelled to serve in the interests of defending a neutrality that was seemingly unthreatened, while receiving little physical, moral, or educational support in return. The 'school of the nation' purported to transform the often illiterate, pious, and backwards rural labourer into a productive contributor to society while under arms. However, appalling conditions, corruptive elements in the barracks, and a developing linguistic question created fissures between the army and society. This was particularly the case in rural Flanders where families believed that Catholic values were being systematically undermined through interaction with Liberal and latterly Socialist Walloons. It reinforced the already prevalent antimilitarism in these parts and explains why the Catholic Party

³R. Boijen, 'Het Leger als Smeltkroes van de Natie?', *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis*, no. 3 (1997), pp. 55–70.

came to defy the army on military issues for the majority of the nineteenth century.

Whereas the bourgeoisie could leave the burden and harsh realities of military service to the lower classes, they could not so easily escape their public duties in the Civic Guard. While exhibiting flashes of pride in the exclusivity of their corps and its role as the guardians of the Revolution, they were no more drawn to the idea of militarism in this form than in the army proper. Certainly, the organisational failings did not help foster a martial spirit, with professionalism often marginalised by abuses during the quinquennial election of officers. Nevertheless, its performance, together with the more experienced Gendarmerie during the 1848 crisis, suggested that it could play a role in the maintenance of internal order. This would prove to be the zenith of its existence, however, as prolonged periods of peace, a reorganisation that limited participation to a few of the country's urban centres, and a lack of funding from the authorities who did not trust it to fulfil the role of a reserve force, sent the Civic Guard into decline.

The effects were clearly noted during the 1886 workers' riots, in which inexperience and indiscipline saw the Civic Guard's traditional role as an aid to the civil power usurped by the increasingly important and ever-growing Gendarmerie. The faith shown in the latter's ability as the primary State bulwark against the social upheaval of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was testament to its professionalism, organisation, and apolitical nature. It was held in stark contrast to the Civic Guard, which, in its urban composition, had been subjected to Liberal and, in some cases Socialist, ideals that placed it at odds with the Catholic Government's attitude towards civil unrest. Although the bourgeoisie ought to have provided the surest safeguard against the rise of socialism, shared beliefs in the extension of the franchise and anticlericalism left the authorities unsure of the Civic Guard's reliability. As with other aspects of the army, the auxiliary forces demonstrated the centrality of political affiliations and the influence of the urban-rural divide in the problematic development of the military establishment.

Amidst the lengthy deliberations over the composition, organisation, and capabilities of the armed forces, civil-military debates equally had to contend with the issue of fortifications. The expenditure involved in the construction and renovation of the national redoubt at Antwerp (1859 and 1906), as well as Liège and Namur (1887), significantly compromised military reform. To appease a disaffected electorate, governments

(particularly the Catholic ministries from 1884 onwards) were forced into assurances that the annual contingent would not be raised, despite its obvious necessity. The *Meetings* of Antwerp were particularly prominent in holding the Government to account and demonstrated, again, the designs of local and commercial interests over national security. This was mirrored around the country and created the conditions for party politics to intervene. The Liberals were the guiltiest in this respect after losing power in the mid-1880s. Their attempts to rally local support in Liège and Namur against new constructions in 1887 in order to sow seeds of discontent within the Catholic ranks, was even more galling given their support of the project while in power themselves. The situation was to repeat itself in 1906 with the redevelopment of Antwerp, and it revealed the ugly nature of political interference in matters that ought to have been left predominantly to the military authorities.

Ostensibly the debates revolved around the strategic questions of how to assimilate the army and its fortifications into a system that would best answer Belgium's international obligations to defend its neutrality. The geography of the country and the capabilities of the army compelled Antwerp to be at the centre of any future strategy. Under the direction of Brialmont, Antwerp, with its polygonal forts, was designed to act as the final bastion for the nation in the event of a direct invasion. Along with bridgeheads on the Meuse, it created a central point of mobilisation that would allow a concentration of forces at the decisive point to delay an enemy while aid from a guarantor power arrived. This decision, made in 1859, was to endure until the creation of a General Staff in 1910 despite alterations to technology and European geopolitics somewhat outpacing its principles. Indeed, developments in artillery and explosives limited the effectiveness of both Antwerp and the Meuse forts at various junctures throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whilst Prussia's acquisition of Alsace-Lorraine in 1870–1871 reduced the probability of an invasion towards Antwerp. However, fortifications had proven useful in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 and perpetuated the idea that they might be the decisive point on which the field army could lean in the defence of the nation. Despite evolutions in strategic thought in the decade preceding the outbreak of war, Belgium remained wedded to its 1859 principles simply out of deference to the effort and funds invested in them. Although it is impossible to prove whether this was the correct choice, the

realities of the invasion in August 1914 demonstrated that neither the fortifications nor the field army were adequately prepared for a modern war.

Operationally, the Belgian Army performed better than many had expected given the country's prewar civil-military issues. Initially, its defence on the Meuse, which delayed the German advance by 13 days, was viewed as a minor triumph despite the obvious deficiencies of the fortifications when faced with modern heavy artillery. Subsequently, its tenacity during the retreat to Antwerp, but particularly on the Yser, encapsulated a newfound unity of action that resembled something akin to nationalism. The army's contribution to the operational theatre was limited because of losses sustained in these opening encounters, much to the annoyance of Belgium's allies. King Albert, acutely aware of the capabilities of his depleted force, refused to bow to British and French pressures to prematurely risk his army, which had become the embodiment of independence while the nation was under occupation. In doing so, he restored an agency to Belgian participation that was dismissed at the time and has subsequently been removed from the historiography. Rightly or wrongly, the Belgian Army only retook the offensive during the Hundred Days to liberate its territory and to secure its own position at the peace table, at which it hoped to play an active role to secure territorial gains.⁴

For much of the war, however, the Belgian Army was simply forced to endure as it recovered from its 1914 exertions. Discipline and morale were of primary importance in this respect. Although it might be contended that the rate of executions before Christmas of 1914 was disproportionately high, this was purely a result of the chaos of war during a period of crisis that required the powerful hand of authority to keep the army in the field. As of the summer of 1915, it was recognised that the rebuilding process required a more supportive system to maintain morale in an army with deprivations that exceeded those of most belligerents. Material acquisitions, in the form of food and clothing, were as well received as recreational literature, sporting competitions, and leave. Yet, the physical separation from loved ones proved difficult to detach from the minds of the citizen soldier, which caused anxieties to surface when war-weariness during the winter of 1917–1918 took hold. *Flamingantism*, encouraged by German propaganda, emerged as

⁴ See D. Stevenson, 'Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Defence of Western Europe, 1914–1920', *International History Review*, vol. 4, no. 4 (1982), pp. 504–522.

a result and threatened to undermine the unity displayed since the outbreak of war. Still, as before the war, Flemish demands were more concerned with attaining parity within a wider concept of a Belgian nation. This was exemplified by the fact that many soldiers involved in the March 1918 'strikes' willingly returned to action to complete the job of ridding the country of the invader. In this respect, the convergence of multiple identifications with the Belgian nation became evident. When faced with 'the other', against which to define itself, the Belgian Army was able to use the ordeal of war as a milieu to belatedly draw the nation together.

In many ways the war proved to be a watershed for Belgium and its army because it emerged from neutrality to secure a more active role in the new world. This resulted in an alliance with France and the freedom to develop its military establishment without international constraints. Conscription saw the army grow to an unprecedented 600,000 men by the mid-1930s, but a combination of economic depression following the Great War and an aversion to new 'offensive' technologies, such as the tank, left reequipping the army short of the mark. Faith in fortifications, however, saw the construction of Eben-Emael near the Dutch-German border that would infamously be taken by a *coup de main* in 1940.⁵ Yet, the First World War was nothing but a momentary respite in a continuum of the nineteenth century civil-military milieu. The Flemish question in the army took on greater significance as *Flamingantism* mutated into a volatile separatist movement. Regional recruitment on linguistic grounds in 1923, and the introduction of Flemish as an official language of command in the army in 1928, had been too long coming. This revealed much wider fissures in society and translated into a demoralised army and officer corps that had still not fully recovered from the travails of the Great War. As such, the army lacked even greater homogeneity than it had in 1914 and, for a second time in a generation, was confronted with a German invasion for which it was unprepared.⁶ Unlike the First World War, however, the

⁵ A. Crahay, *L'Armée Belge Entre les Deux Guerres* (L. Musin, Brussels, 1978), pp. 88 and 138–141.

⁶ É. Wanty, 'Le milieu militaire belge 1830–1945', in *Actes du Colloque d'Histoire Militaire Belge (1830–1980)/Akten van het Colloquium over de Belgische Krijgsgeschiedenis (1830–1980)* (Musée Royal de l'Armée/Koninklijk Legersmuseum, Brussels, 1981), pp. 399–400, 26–28 March 1980.

nation lacked the strong hand of leadership that had seen King Albert conceal the civil–military issues of the nineteenth century. Under the direction of his son, Leopold III, the army of May 1940 was unable to repeat the heroics of Liège, Antwerp, and the Yser.

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