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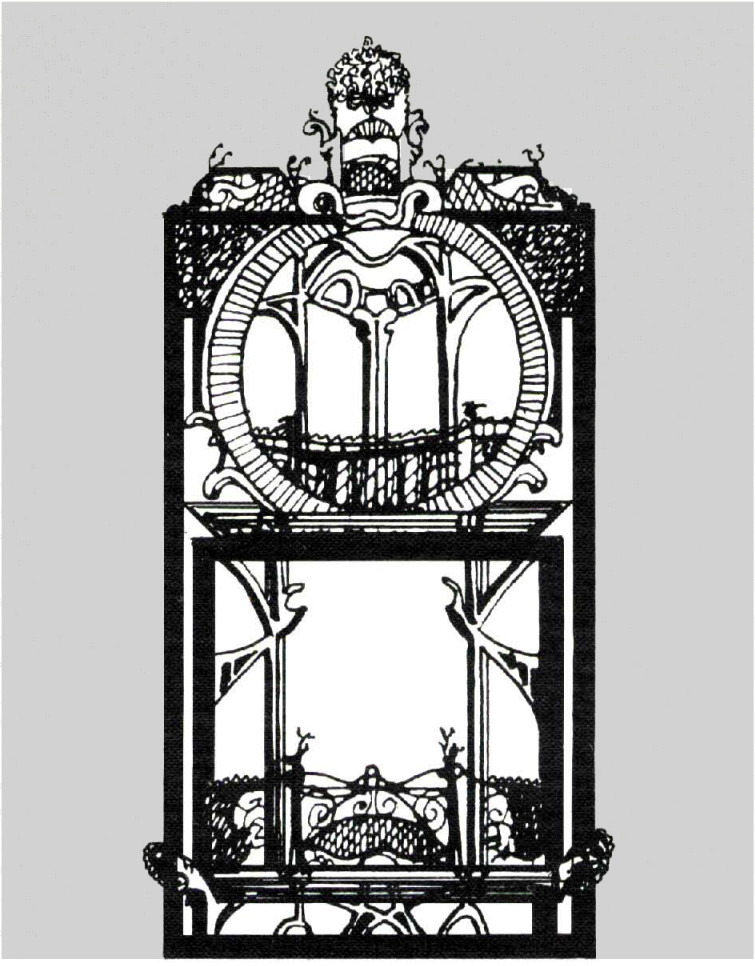
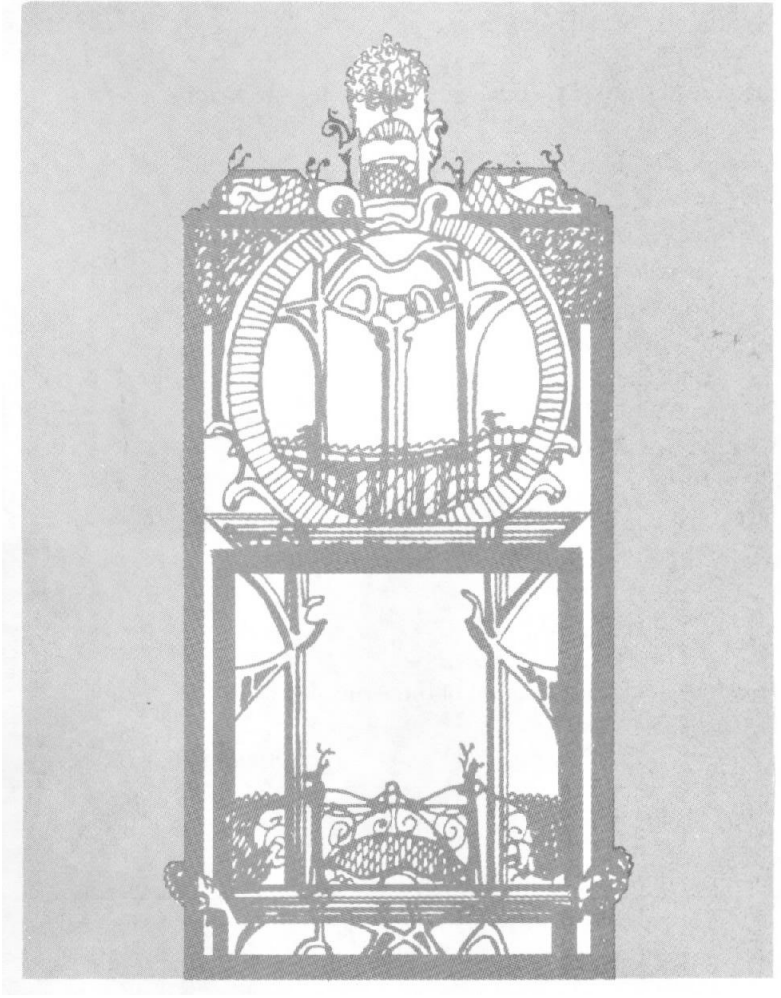
Belgium
a country study



Belgium
a country study

Foreign Area Studies
The American University
Edited by
Stephen B. Wickman
Research completed
November 1984



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Foreword

This volume is one of a continuing series of books prepared by Foreign Area Studies, The American University, under the Country Studies/Area Handbook Program. The last page of this book provides a listing of other published studies. Each book in the series deals with a particular foreign country, describing and analyzing its economic, national security, political, and social systems and institutions and examining the interrelationships of those systems and institutions and the ways that they are shaped by cultural factors. Each study is written by a multidisciplinary team of social scientists. The authors seek to provide a basic insight and understanding of the society under observation, striving for a dynamic rather than a static portrayal of it. The study focuses on historical antecedents and on the cultural, political and socioeconomic characteristics that contribute to cohesion and cleavage within the society. Particular attention is given to the origins and traditions of the people who make up the society, their dominant beliefs and values, their community of interests and the issues on which they are divided, the nature and extent of their involvement with the national institutions, and their attitudes toward each other and toward the social system and political order within which they live.

The contents of the book represent the views, opinions, and findings of Foreign Area Studies and should not be construed as an official Department of the Army position, policy, or decision, unless so designated by other official documentation. The authors have sought to adhere to accepted standards of scholarly objectivity. Such corrections, additions, and suggestions for factual or other changes that readers may have will be welcomed for use in future new editions.

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The authors also wish to express their gratitude to members of the Foreign Area Studies staff who contributed directly to the preparation of the manuscript. These include Lenny Granger, Andrea T. Merrill, Dorothy Lohmann, and Denise Ryan, who edited the manuscript and the accompanying figures and tables; Harriett R. Blood and Gustavo Adolfo Mendoza, who prepared the graphics; and Beverly A. Johnson, who photocomposed the manuscript. The authors appreciate the assistance provided by Gilda V. Nimer, staff librarian; and Lynn W. Dorn, assistant liberian; Ernest A. Will, publications manager; and Eloise W. Brandt and Wayne W. Olsen, administrative assistants. This study was indexed by Rachel Johnson.

The aesthetic touches that enhance the book's appearance are the work of Mr. Mendoza, whose illustrations appear on the cover and the title pages of the chapters. The inclusion of photographs was made possible by the generosity of various individuals and public and private agencies. The authors acknowledge their particular indebtedness to the Belgian Information and Documentation Institute for its contributions.

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Preface

Major political and economic developments have outdated the *Area Handbook for Belgium* since its publication in 1974. Nine governments have taken a turn at managing the deteriorating industrial economy and the continuing controversy between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgians. A revision of the Constitution in 1980 clarified the structure and powers of new regional governments that had been proposed in constitutional changes of 1971. *Belgium: A Country Study* traces these developments in some detail and, like its predecessor, attempts to treat in a compact and objective manner the dominant social, economic, political, and national security aspects of the society.

Sources of information used in the preparation of this study include scholarly journals and monographs, official reports of governments and international organizations, foreign and domestic newspapers, periodicals, and interviews with individuals having special competence in Belgian affairs. A bibliography appears at the end of the book; brief comments on some of the more valuable sources are at the end of each chapter.

Measurements in this study are given in the metric system, and a conversion table is provided (see table 1, Appendix A.). Economic and other tabular data also appear in Appendix A. Percentage rates of economic growth are given in real terms—i.e., adjusted for inflation—except where otherwise noted. Readers may refer to the Glossary for Belgian franc exchange rates. Information on the organization and operation of the European Communities and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is available in two special appendixes prepared, respectively, by Stephen B. Wickman and Peter J. Kassander.

An effort has been made to limit the use of Dutch and French words and phrases, but a number were deemed necessary for an understanding of the society. These are defined the first time they appear in the text, or reference is made to the Glossary. Where both Dutch and French are applicable, the Dutch is given first. The reader should refer to Table A at the end of the Preface this section for the full expansion of institutions known by their non-English acronyms or abbreviations. English spelling follows *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*.

The spelling of place-names and administrative units poses a particular problem. This study follows the usage of the United States Board on Geographic Names, as set forth in the official gazetteer published in 1963. In general, Dutch is used for entities

located in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of the country, and French for those in Wallonia, the French-speaking part of the country, excluding Brussels, which is legally bilingual. The conventional English spellings are used only for the cities of Brussels, Ghent, and Antwerp. The reader is urged to refer to the list of selected Dutch and French administrative and geographical names (see table 2, Appendix A).

Table A. Selected Acronyms and Abbreviations[1]

Acronym or Abbreviations	English-Language Form and/or Description	Local-Language Form
AAB	Belgian Agricultural Alliance	Alliance Agricole Belge
ABVV/FGTB	General Federation of Belgian Labor	*Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond van België*/ Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique
ACLBV/CGSLB	General Center of Belgian Liberal Trade Unions	*Algemeen Centrale der Liberale Vakbonden van België*/ Centrale Générale des Syndicats Liberaux de Belgique
ACV/CSC	Federation of Belgian Christian Trade Unions	*Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond van België*/ Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens de Belgique
ACW/MOC	Christian Workers Movement	*Algemeen Christelijk Werkersverbond*/ Mouvement Ouvrier Chrétien
Agalev/Ecolo	Ecologists Party	*Anders Gaan Leven*/Ecologistes
Boerenbond	Farmers League	*Belgische Boerenbond*
BRT/RTBF	Belgian Radio and Television	*Belgische Radio en Televisie*/Radio-Télévision Belge de la Communauté Culturelle Française
BSP/PSB	Belgian Socialist Party (the Socialists from 1945 to 1978, when they split into the SP and PS)	*Belgische Socialistische Partij*/Parti Socialiste Belge
CVP	Christian People's Party (Dutch-speaking of the Social Christian parties, which include the PSC)	*Christelijke Volkspartij*
FDF	Democratic Front of Francophones	Front Démocratique des Francophones
KPB/PCB	Belgian Communist Party	*Kommunistische Partij van België*/ Parti Communiste de Belgique
KUL/UCL	Catholic University of Louvain	*Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*/ Université Catholique de Louvain
MPW	Popular Walloon Movement	Mouvement Populaire Wallon

Table A. (Continued).

NIM/SNI	National Investment Company	*National Investeringsmaatschappij*/ Société Nationale d'Investissement
PDB	Party of the German-speaking Belgians	Partei der Deutschsprachigen Belgier[2]
PLP	Party of Liberty and Progress (French-speaking wing of the Liberal parties—including the PVV—from 1961 to 1979)	Parti pour la Libert ét le Progrès
PRL	Party of Liberal Reform (French-speaking of the Liberal parties, or Liberals, which include the PVV)	Parti Réformateur Liberal
PS	Socialist Party (French-speaking of the Socialist parties, which include the SP)	Parti Socialiste
PSC	Social Christian Party (French-speaking of the Social Christian parties, which include the CVP)	Parti Social Chrétien
PVV	Party of Liberty and Progress (Dutch-speaking of the Liberal parties, which include the PRL and, before 1979, the PLP)	*Partij voor Vrijheid en Vooruitgang*
RAD/UDRT	Democratic Union for the Respect for Work	*Respect voor Arbeid en Democratie*/Union Démocratique pour le Respect du Travail
SP	Socialist Party (Dutch-speaking of the Socialist parties, which include the PS)	*Socialistische Partij*
RTT/RTT	Belgian State Telephone System	*Regie voor Telegraaf en Telefoon*/Régie des Télégraphs et des Téléphones
RW	Walloon Rally	Rassemblement Wallon
UPA	National Federation of Professional Agricultural Unions	Fédération Nationale des Unions Professionelles Agricoles de Belgique
VBO/FEB	Federation of Belgian Enterprises	*Verbond van Belgische Ondernemingen*/Fédération des Enterprises de Belgique

Table A. (Continued).

Verdinaso	League of the Dutch-speaking Partisans of National Solidarity	*Verbond van Dietsche Nationaalsolidaristen*
VFP/PFU	United Feminist Party	*Vereenigde Feministische Partij*/Parti Féministe Unifié
VNV	Flemish National League	*Vlaamsche National Verbond*
VU	People's Union	*Volksunie*
VUB/ULB	Free University of Brussels	*Vrije Universiteit Brussel*/Université Libre de Bruxelles

[1]Dutch in italics.
[2]German.

Table B. Chronology of Belgian History, 1787–1984

Monarch	Event
Emperor Joseph II of Austria	
1787	Total reform of general administration and justice system leads to massive opposition
1789–90	Brabant Revolution—conservative and liberal democratic opponents of Austrian rule join forces and invade Belgium
Emperor Leopold II of Austria	
1790	Declaration of Independence by United States of Belgium (January) Restoration of Austrian rule (December)
1792	War between France and Austria; France occupies Austrian Netherlands after Battle of Jemappes (November)
1795	France annexes Austrian Netherlands and prince-bishopric of Liège
1798	Actions against Roman Catholic Church and imposition of consription lead to peasants' war in Flanders, Brabant, the Kempenland, and Luxembourg
Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte of France	
1815	Great powers create Kingdom of the United Netherlands out of the Dutch Republic (Holland) and the Austrian Netherlands William I of Holland becomes sovereign prince of Belgium. Napoleon's defeat at Battle of Waterloo

Table B. (Continued).

King William I

1815	New constitution establishes bicameral parliament with equal representation for both north and south (formerly Dutch Republic and Austrian Netherlands)
1819	Government declares Dutch will be only official language in Flemish provinces after 1823
1828	Union of Oppositions—alliance of Liberals and Roman Catholics—founded to seek political reforms and greater freedom
1830	Disturbances in Brussels and Liège escalate into revolutionary movement Provisional Government proclaims independence Election of the National Congress Great powers begin conference in London to negotiate resolution of Belgian problem
1831	Ratification of new Belgian Constitution (February) Leopold of Saxe-Coburg elected King of the Belgians (June)

King Leopold I (1831–65)

1831	Proposals of London Conference recognizing Belgian independence and establishing its "perpetual neutrality" accepted by Belgians; rejected by William I Dutch invasion of Belgium (August); Dutch withdraw when French intervene on side of Belgium
1838	Belgian bishops condemn Freemasonry, threaten excommunication of Catholic Masons

Table B. (Continued).

1839	King William recognizes Belgian independence Great powers guarantee Belgian neutrality
1842	Legislation permitting Roman Catholic schools to be part of state education system Right to use Flemish in primary schools established
1846	Liberal Party founded
1848	First extension of suffrage
1850	Legislation passed strengthening Liberal policy of secularization of education
1862	Flemish Meeting Party formed to protest fortifications and general conditions in Flanders
1863	First Roman Catholic Congress of Malines marks beginning of Catholic party organization
1864	Standardization of Flemish into Dutch
1865	Death of Leopold I; succession of Leopold II
King Leopold II (1865–1909)	
1873	First language legislation recognizing bilingualism in Flanders

Table B. (Continued).

1879	First School Conflict (until 1884) over church-state relations
1884	Catholic party established Settlement of school conflict by compromise agreement
1885	Belgian Workers Party established Congo Free State receives international recognition with Leopold II as sovereign
1886	Strikes and violent demonstrations in Wallonia
1887	First social legislation
1893	Revision of Constitution establishes universal male suffrage with plural votes for qualified electors
1898	Dutch recognized as an official language
1908	Congo Free State becomes Belgian colony
1909	Death of Leopold II; succession of Albert
King Albert (1909–34)	
1913	Introduction of mandatory conscription
1914	Introduction of compulsory education World War I begins; German occupation of Belgium

Table B. (Continued).

1916	Opening of Dutch-language university at Ghent by Germans
1917	Administrative separation of Flanders and Wallonia under occupation regime Organization of Flemish soldiers in "Front Movement" Council of Flanders founded under occupation regime
1918	End of World War I
1919	Treaty of Versailles, annexation of eastern German-speaking cantons Introduction of universal male franchise
1921	Second revision of Constitution to legalize new franchise regulations
1922	Belgium-Luxembourg Economic Union formed
1925	Locarno Treaties
1930	Dutch-language university at Ghent established by Belgium
1931	Great Depression begins in Belgium
1932	Language legislation introduces unilingual administration for each community granting concessions to minority language groups
1934	Albert dies; succession of Leopold III

Table B. (Continued).

King Leopold III (1934–51)

1936	Return to strict neutrality
1939	World War II begins
1940	German invasion (May)
1944	Liberation

Prince Albert (regent) (1944–51)

	Start of Royal Question
	Royal decree establishes Social Security system Benelux convention signed, formed 1948
1947	Language census provokes controversy
1948	Women given right to vote
1949	North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) founded

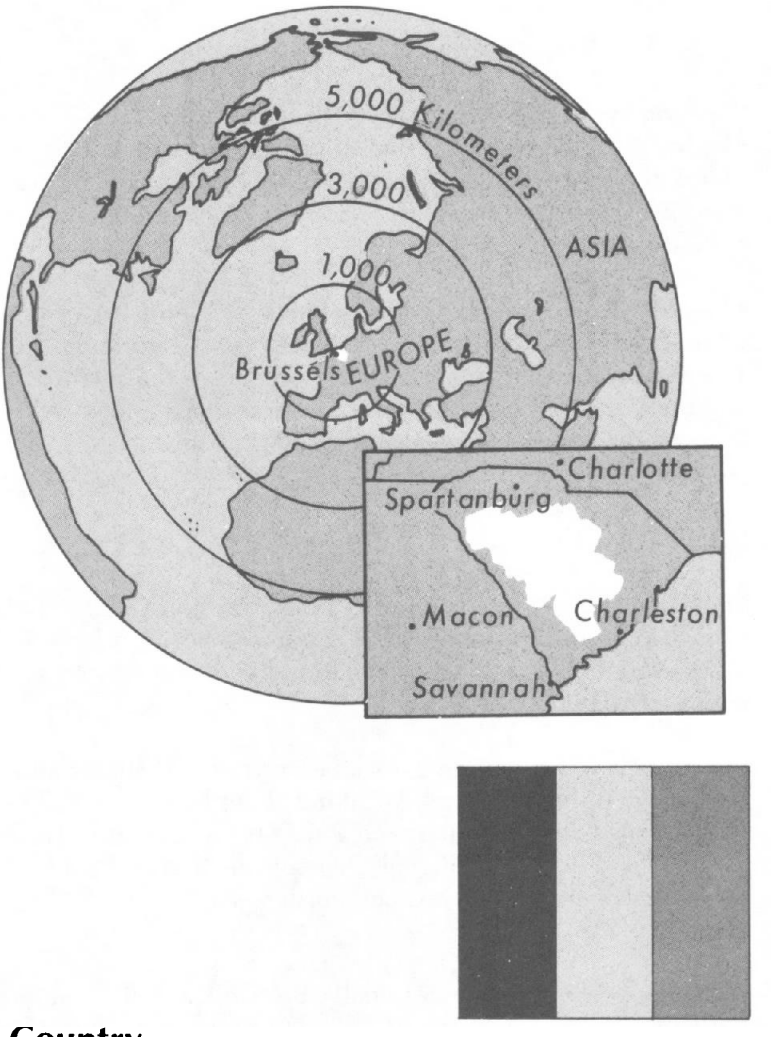
Table B. (Continued).

1950	Second School Conflict begins.
1951	Leopold III abdicates in favor of son, Baudouin
King Baudouin (1951–)	
1958	School Pact ends Second School Conflict European Economic Community established
1960–61	Austerity budget (*loi unique*) announced; followed by general strike in Wallonia
1962	Belgian Congo, Ruanda, and Urundi become independent (present-day Zaïre, Rwanda, and Burundi, respectively) Linguistic boundaries established
1968	Crisis of Catholic University of Louvain Social Christians split into Flemish and Walloon parties
1971	Third reform of the Constitution establishes four linguistic regions and three cultural communities
1972	Liberals split into Flemish, Walloon, and Brussels wings
1973	International oil crisis ensures continuing economic problems
1977–78	Community Pact (commonly known as Egmont Pact) over reform of the state agreed to by major parties, but collapses

Table B. (Continued).

1978	Socialists split into Flemish and Walloon parties
1979	Second international oil crisis NATO adopts "two-track" agreement of force modernization (Intermediate Nuclear Force—INF) and East-West arms control talks
1980	Constitutional reform modifies the 1971 reform and specifies the form of community and regional institutions, except for Brussels
1981	General elections and coalition government under Wilfried Martens (Martens V)
1982–84	Government granted special powers

Country Profile



Country

Formal Name: Kingdom of Belgium.
Short Form: Belgium.
Term for Citizens: Belgians.
Capital: Brussels.
Flag: Vertical tricolor of black at the staff side, yellow, and red.

Geography

Size: 30,519 square kilometers.

Topography: Divided into three regions: Northern Lowlands, Central Low Plateaus, and Southern Hilly Region. Plateaus divided in half by Sambre-Meuse valley. Plateaus blend into hills and low, mountainous terrain in south. Major rivers Meuse and Schelde.

Climate: Northwest Belgium belongs to Flemish Oceanic Region and rest of country to West European Continental Region. Predominantly maritime. Coastal areas have mild winters, cool summers. Extremes greater in interior regions. Northwest drier than southeast because of altitude and exposure.

Society

Population: About 9.9 million in 1983, averaging 323 persons per square kilometer. Growth was 0.2 percent per year from 1970 to 1982. About 50 percent of population lived in communes having over 10,000 people in 1979.

Language: Major source of social identity and conflict. Some 5.6 million people in Dutch-speaking Flanders, 3.2 million in French-speaking Wallonia, and 997,000 speakers of various languages in officially bilingual Brussels in 1981. About 65,000 German speakers on German border. About 860,000 foreign guest workers.

Religion: Vast majority nominally Roman Catholic, but only 29 percent attended mass in 1978. Small number of Jews, Protestants, and Muslims. About 20 percent of total did not adhere to any religion in 1984.

Health and Welfare: Comprehensive national health insurance and welfare programs covering disability, retirement, survivor benefits, unemployment, and family allowances.

Education: Compulsory full-time for ages six to 15 and part-time until age 18. Some 90 percent of relevant age-group in secondary

school in 1981 and 26 percent aged 20 to 24 in higher education. About 98 percent literacy. Educational system divided by language and ideological or religious (usually Catholic) affiliation. Most state schools considered ideologically neutral.

Economy

Gross National Product (GNP): Equivalent to US$81.2 billion in 1983 (US$8,235 per capita). Real GNP growth about 5 percent per year during 1960–73; slowed to about one-half this rate in subsequent years and stagnated after 1980. GNP growth 0.5 percent in 1983; foreign demand responsible for the modest increase. Global recessionary conditions and structural imbalances largely responsible for poor economic performance.

Budget: Expenditure by central government and local authorities equivalent to US$51.3 billion in 1982 and revenues US$38.8 billion; deficit 15.3 percent of GNP. Major government effort to reduce deficit to 7 percent of GNP by 1988.

Unemployment: 13.9 percent of economically active population at end of 1983. Government employment support measures included wage restraint, early retirement, job creation, part-time employment, and shorter working hours. Slowdown in growth of unemployment in 1984.

Resources: Some coal. Heavily dependent on imports of ores, minerals, rubber, and certain agricultural products. Development of domestic nuclear industry reducing petroleum consumption.

Industry: Manufacturing, mining, construction, and utilities about 34 percent of GNP in 1982; 28 percent of economically active population in 1981. Transportation equipment, electrical products, machinery, food processing, chemicals, iron, and steel leading manufacturing sectors. About 70 percent of manufactures exported.

Services: Commerce, finance, transportation, communications, and public service nearly two-thirds of GNP in 1982; 57 percent of economically active population in 1981. Small retail shops account for major share of domestic trade, but chain stores and supermarkets spreading rapidly.

Agriculture: Accounted for 2.4 percent of GNP and 2.5 percent of employment in 1983. Farmland about 46 percent of land surface in 1982. Small farms, intensive cultivation. Main crops sugar beets, wheat, potatoes, and barley, but livestock raising more important than cropping. Domestic production supplies between 80 and 90 percent of food needs.

Imports: US$50.6 billion in 1982, of which 25 percent metal products, machinery, and transportation equipment; 23 percent chemicals, rubber, iron, steel, and nonferrous metals; and about 21 percent energy products. European Communities (EC) countries supplied 63 percent of imports, and other industrialized, free-market countries 23 percent.

Exports: US$46.8 billion in 1982, of which 26 percent metal products, machinery, and transportation equipment; 18 percent chemicals, rubbers, and plastics; about 18 percent iron, steel, and nonferrous metals; some 9 percent food, beverages, and tobacco; remainder mostly petroleum products, textiles, and consumer goods. EC countries bought 70 percent of exports, and other industrialized free-market countries 13 percent.

Balance of Payments: Trade balance negative 1973–83. Current account balance in deficit 1977–83, but improvement in 1982 and 1983 because of better export performance, reduced oil imports, and greater surplus on services account. Normally short-term private capital outflows and public sector capital inflows owing to external financing of government deficit since 1977.

Exchange Rate: Two spot exchange markets, official and free. Most current transactions settled in official market, where average exchange rate was BF51.132 (for value of the Belgian franc—see Glossary) to US$1 in 1983. Devaluation of Belgian franc by 8.5 percent in 1982 influential in restoring export competitiveness. Linked in customs association with the Netherlands and Luxembourg and monetary association with Luxembourg. Participant in exchange rate and intervention mechanism of European Monetary System and member of EC.

Inland Waterways and Ports: System about 1,570 kilometers as of January 1983. River fleet numbered 2,410 vessels with total capacity of 1.5 million tons; merchant fleet 105 vessels with total capacity of 2 million tons. Three major seaports (Antwerp, Ghent,

and Zeebrugge) have developed into industrial complexes. In 1981 inland shipping accounted for 18 percent of freight carried within Belgium.

Roads: About 18,000 kilometers of main communications highways, including 1,300 kilometers of express motorways in 1983. In 1981 trucking accounted for 69 percent of freight carried.

Railroads: One of world's densest railroad networks. Government-owned system consisted of about 4,000 kilometers in 1983, of which some 2,900 accommodated passenger traffic. Passenger and freight traffic generally in decline since 1974. In 1981 carried 13 percent of total freight. All important lines electrified.

Aviation: SABENA only large commercial carrier, 90 percent state owned and serviced 50 countries in 1983. Five airports, but Brussels National Airport handles about 90 percent of airline passenger traffic.

Telecommunications: Telephone and telegraph services controlled by government. Telephone service 100 percent automated to all parts of country and to many foreign countries. Conversion to fully digitalized exchanges being pursued in 1984.

Government and Politics

Government: Parliamentary democracy under constitutional monarchy sanctioned by Constitution of 1831, as amended. Separation of powers into executive, legislative, and judicial categories on one side, and into national and regional levels on other side. King titular head of state; prime minister serves as head of government chosen from among leaders of major political parties represented in parliament. Government mandate renewed through elections held at four-year intervals unless dissolved sooner.

Administrative Division: At highest level, two communities (Dutch- and French-speaking), two regions (Flanders and Wallonia), and Brussels (neutral, bilingual metropolis accessible to both communities and regions). Below this level, four Dutch-speaking and four French-speaking provinces and one bilingual province, Brabant. Latter, like Brussels, under control of central government. Provinces divide into arrondissements (districts),

which divide into communes.

Justice: French influence in codified laws and court structures. Court of Cassation at top of four-tier court hierarchy; assize courts, courts of appeal, labor courts, and military courts in provinces; tribunals of first instance, tribunals of commerce, and labor tribunals in legal districts; and justices of the peace and police tribunals at commune level. Judiciary enjoys high professional reputation.

Politics: Open and vigorous partisan competition for electoral mandate through multiparty system reflecting diverse socioeconomic and ideological tendencies. Elections by proportional representation, and no single party has been able to capture majority of seats in lower house of parliament since late 1950s. Representation in both houses dominated by three traditional political party families: centrist Social Christians, right-of-center Liberals, and left-of-center Socialists. Each of three is split into two separate parties along linguistic and regional lines, but all collaborate in coalition building at national level. Traditional political groupings under increasing challenge by minor parties appealing to specific and narrow linguistic, regional, and socioeconomic interests.

Foreign Affairs: Member of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance and strong proponent of European integration on multi-faceted levels. Much trade with West European countries. Very close relations with former African colonies, of Zaïre, Rwanda, and Burundi (formerly called Belgian Congo, Ruanda, and Urundi, respectively).

National Security

Armed Forces: Total personnel on active duty in 1984 approximately 93,600; total reserve, 178,500.

Component Services: Army, 65,100; navy, 4,550; and air force, 21,000.

Major Tactical Military Units: In 1984 army had one armored brigade, three mechanized infantry brigades, one para-commando regiment, three reconnaissance battalions, one tank battalion, two motorized infantry battalions, three artillery battal-

ions, one surface-to-air missile battalion, four air defense battalions, five engineer battalions, and four light aviation squadrons. Navy had four frigates, seven ocean-going minesweepers, and a variety of coastal minehunters and patrol vessels. Air force had five fighter and ground-attack squadrons, two air defense squadrons, one reconnaissance squadron, two transport squadrons, one sea and air rescue squadron, four training squadrons, and four surface-to-air missile squadrons.

Military Equipment: Most equipment of United States, French, or British design. Some manufacturing of equipment done under licensing agreements. Extensive local small-arms manufacture.

Military Budget: Expenditures represented BF99 billion, or 3.7 percent of total governmental budget and 2.4 percent of estimated gross domestic product for 1984.

Foreign Military Treaties: NATO, 1949.

Police Forces: National gendarmerie staffed by 16,200. Municipal and Rural Police forces in small cities and towns. Criminal Police service performs investigative functions. All police forces under civilian control.

Figure 1. Provinces and Language Regions, 1984

Introduction

A cartoon character appearing in a French-language Belgian publication in early 1984 lamented: "The more one knows how things are going in Flanders and Wallonia, the less one knows how things are going in Belgium." The same complaint could easily come from an outside observer struggling to understand this small but complex country.

Flanders, roughly the northern half of the country, is inhabited primarily by the Dutch-speaking Flemings, who make up the majority of the Belgian population (see fig. 1; table 3, Appendix A). Its historical and cultural identities are distinct from those of Wallonia, home of the French-speaking Walloons, who account for about one-third of the population. In between lies the national capital, Brussels, where most of the residents speak French but do not consider themselves to be Walloons. Brussels was traditionally a Flemish city, as its art and architecture attest, and its so-called Frenchification has bothered some Flemings, who for years were treated as second-class citizens throughout the country. The tensions between these regions and language communities have been the most outstanding features of the society.

The origins of the language problem date to well before Belgium's independence in 1830, but the histories of these early years can suffer from either of two common biases. On the one hand are historians who stress the unity of the Belgian peoples in opposing foreign domination. On the other hand are those who emphasize the separateness of the Dutch speakers and the French speakers, arguing that Belgium is the unnatural creation of the European powers who so often battled over its territory.

The language division occurred gradually after the Germanic Franks began to invade the territory in the fifth century A.D., wresting it from the Romans (see Early History, ch. 1). In the northern part of the territory, where the Germanic influence was strongest, early forms of Dutch developed. In the southern part, the continued Latin influence gave rise to early forms of French. During the next millennium, however, the divisiveness inherent in feudalism (see Glossary) prevented the development of a single center of power and culture, leaving the various duchies and towns that sprang up in the territory to their own devices. In particular, the cities and towns of Flanders flourished during the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance; the architecture and painting of the Flemish masters were unsurpassed anywhere else in Europe.

After the mid-sixteenth century, the territory came under progressively stronger forms of foreign rule for three centuries (see Foreign Domination, ch. 1). Although the Netherlands succeeded in throwing out the Spanish Habsburgs in 1585, the southern part of the Lowlands failed in its attempt to join the effort. Thereafter the two areas developed separately. The crucial port of Antwerp, whose access was through the Netherlands, was closed for more than two centuries. During the ravages of the Inquisition, many Protestants fled to the Netherlands from the area that eventually became Belgium. During the period of Austrian rule (1715–95) the old local hierarchy of the Roman Catholic clergy, the nobility, and the medieval guilds, together with the growing middle classes of merchants, professionals, and intellectuals, began to unite in opposing political centralization. Internal conflicts between the conservative and progressive elements of this primarily French-speaking opposition, however, undermined the brief Brabant Revolution (1789–90)—the precursor of independent Belgium—even as Napoleon's armies swept decisively across the country.

After Napolean's final defeat in 1815 at Waterloo (located just south of Brussels), the European powers carried out their plan to unite the Belgian provinces with the Netherlands under William of Orange. If William had been receptive to the demands of the opposition in the southern part of his kingdom, Belgium and the Netherlands might have remained one country. Instead, his obstinacy and incompetence prompted the Belgian elite, still primarily French-speaking, to take control of the deteriorating economic and political situation themselves and ultimately to declare independence. The European powers found the prospect of an independent and neutral Belgium to their liking and forced William to acquiesce.

The Dutch-speaking Belgians did not protest the independence movement, but they gradually realized that history had relegated them to the status of second-class citizens in a country where they formed the majority. French had been the language of government and culture since the days of Spanish rule, and the constitution of 1831 did nothing to ensure equal treatment for the Dutch languages. Laws recognizing biligualism in Flanders (1873), making Dutch an official language (1898), and establishing separate Dutch and French administrations in Flanders and Wallonia (1932) were too long in the making. The political elite, even that of Flemish parentage, was Fench-speaking. The situation was exacerbated by the Industrial Revolution, which touched down in the coalfields and ironworks of Wallonia before spreading

elsewhere in Europe, leaving much of Flanders to languish in relative poverty.

After the devastation of the two world wars, which again used Belgium as a battleground, the language issue moved to the center stage of politics. The controversy reached its worst pass in 1968, when the Flemish students at the prestigious Catholic University of Louvain (KUL/UCL) took to the streets to demand the removal of the French half of the university to Wallonia. The government coalition fell apart during the crisis, and the political elite, which by then had become primarily Dutch-speaking, redoubled its efforts to find a permanent solution to the language, or communities, problem. The politicians agreed among themselves to change the Constitution, decentralizing some political powers to new regional and community councils. The changes promulgated in 1971 had to be modified yet again, amid controversy, in 1980. The status of Brussels was left unresolved, region governments being set up only in Flanders and Wallonia. Ironically, economic decline in the aging industries of Wallonia and the profitable growth of small-scale industry in Flanders had completely turned the tables in favor of the Flemings by that time.

Balancing the demands of the Dutch- and French-speaking Belgians remained the most obvious concern of the Belgian political elite in early 1985. Each of the traditional political parties had split into two separate parties, one for the Dutch speakers, the other for the French speakers. In addition, there were minority parties representing even more strident opinions in favor of extreme views on regional autonomy (see Political Parties, ch. 4). But there were other issues of almost equal importance that also had their roots in the nation's intensely political history. One set of issues pertained to the role of religion in the society, the other to matters of social and economic equity. In fact, before the language problem became the major focus of attention, these issued had dominated Belgian politics.

Belgium is a Catholic country. (Some historians have argued that the strong Roman Catholic tradition of the Flemish population was responsible for its support of the Belgian independence movement against the Protestant king to the Netherland.) Most Belgians are baptized Roman Catholics, and even if they are nonpracticing, they must confront the values and attitudes of Catholicism in their daily lives (see Religion, ch. 2). Organizations promoting laicism, for example, have felt the need to develop rites of passage similar to those of Catholicism. Many schools, moreover, are Catholic, and the values that seem to prevail in the society can perhaps be traced to its Catholic traditions. But there is also a

strong secularist tradition.

The secularist tradition has been championed by the Liberals, who have received substantial suppport from the Freemasons. In 1945 they faced off against the political party representing the Catholics, who renamed themselves the Social Christians, severing their formal links to the Roman Catholic Church. The main battleground of these two parties has been the school system, which until the nation's independence had been overwhelmingly Catholic. A political compromise in 1884 established acceptable guidelines for a separate secular system; the government provided assistance to both systems (see The First School Conflict, ch. 1). The so-called school conflict flared up again, however, in the 1950s. It was settled by another compromise that indexed government assistance to the level of enrollment in each school (see The Second School Conflict, 1950–58, ch. 1; Education, ch. 2).

The Socialists, who form the third of the three traditional political groupings in Belgium, have supported the Liberals in their fight for a strong secular school system but have quarreled with them over the pace of democratic and social reform. They championed the cause of the working class, which was particularly strong in Wallonia, developing their own unions, cooperatives, and mutual aid societies. As the right to vote was extended to broader segments of the male population in 1848 and 1919 and to the entire adult population in 1948, the Social Christians and the Liberals tried to win popular support by creating institutions similar to those of the Socialists (see Consolidation of the System, ch. 1). (For the formal names of the three traditional political groupings, see table A; Political Parties, ch. 4).

Some Belgian sociologists and political scientists, borrowing a concept from the Netherlands, have argued tha Belgium was thereby carved up into three ideological pillars (see Glossary) that organized the society into networks providing cradle-to-grave services to their supports (see Social Organization and Values, ch. 2). The proclivity of the average Belgian to affiliate with one or another of these social pillars, however, does not mean that he or she is less individualistic than other people. The government dispenses many health and social security benefits through these institutions, prompting Belgians to affiliate with them only for practical reasons (see Health and Social Security, ch. 2).

The economic problems facing the country are similar to those in other European countries, but they are complicated by the language problem and the age of much Belgian industry, which survived World War II without being upgraded or moder-

nized (see Patterns of Development, ch. 3). Unemployment reached nearly 14 percent of the work force in late 1983, and the country's relatively high standard of living became harder and harder to maintain (see Employment and Income, ch. 3). The expense of supporting the comprehensive social security and unemployment insurance programs caused a fiscal crisis that had to be met with unpopular austerity measures in 1984 (see Fiscal Policy, ch. 3). The government has also become involved with the financing and management of the hardest hit economic sectors: steel, textiles and clothing, shipbuilding and repair, coal mining, and bottling (see National Sectors, ch. 3).

The regional distribution of economic activity has been of particular concern since the 1970s. The advanced technological and service-related industries located in the Antwerp-Brussels area and elsewhere in Flanders have grown, while the aging heavy industries of Wallonia have stagnated or declined. Many Flemings felt that their hard-earned money was unfairly taxed to bail out the inefficient industries of Wallonia. The complex financial mechanisms used by the government to support regional industry, however, made it difficult to assess accurately the incidence of regional subsidies and taxes. Economic regionalization was proceeding more slowly than political regionalization, and the central government still controlled more than 90 percent of all national tax revenues (see Regionalization, ch. 3).

Where in the midst of all the linguistic, regional, and ideological variation can a sense of Belgian nationalism be found? Perhaps it is in the area of foreign policy and national security, where the experience of two world wars and centuries of being run over by greater powers has taught the Belgians the importance of unity in adversity. History has also convinced the Belgians of the need for alliances. Belgium has been a strong supporter of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and a major force behind the integration of Europe into the European Communities (see The Postwar Period: Foreign Policy Activism, ch. 1; Foreign Economic Relations, ch. 3; Multilateral Relations, ch. 4; Belgium and NATO, ch. 5). Regional and ideological issues however, have sometimes complicated national security policy. The decision of the governing coalition of Social Christians and Liberals to accept ground-launched cruise missiles as part of a NATO deployment plan, for example, was supported by the French-speaking Socialists because the missiles would be stationed in Wallonia and create jobs. But the Dutch-speaking Socialists and even some Dutch-speaking members of the ruling coalition have expressed increasingly vociferous antinuclear sentiments.

Perhaps there is also such a phenomenon as "Belgitude" or "Belgianness" to be found in the values shared by most Belgians. A cross-national survey of values conducted in 1981 found that Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgians were more similar to each other than to their counterparts in the Netherlands and France. The authors of the study pointed out some interesting contradictions. The Dutch speakers, for instance, attended Catholic mass more regularly than the French speakers yet seemed more tolerant of some social behavior condemned by the Roman Catholic Church. The study concluded that generational differences were more important than language differences in shaping social, political, and family values. The younger generation tended to be more permissive regarding sexual mores, more tolerant of social deviancy, less religious, and more apt to place themselves on the left of the political spectrum than the older generation.

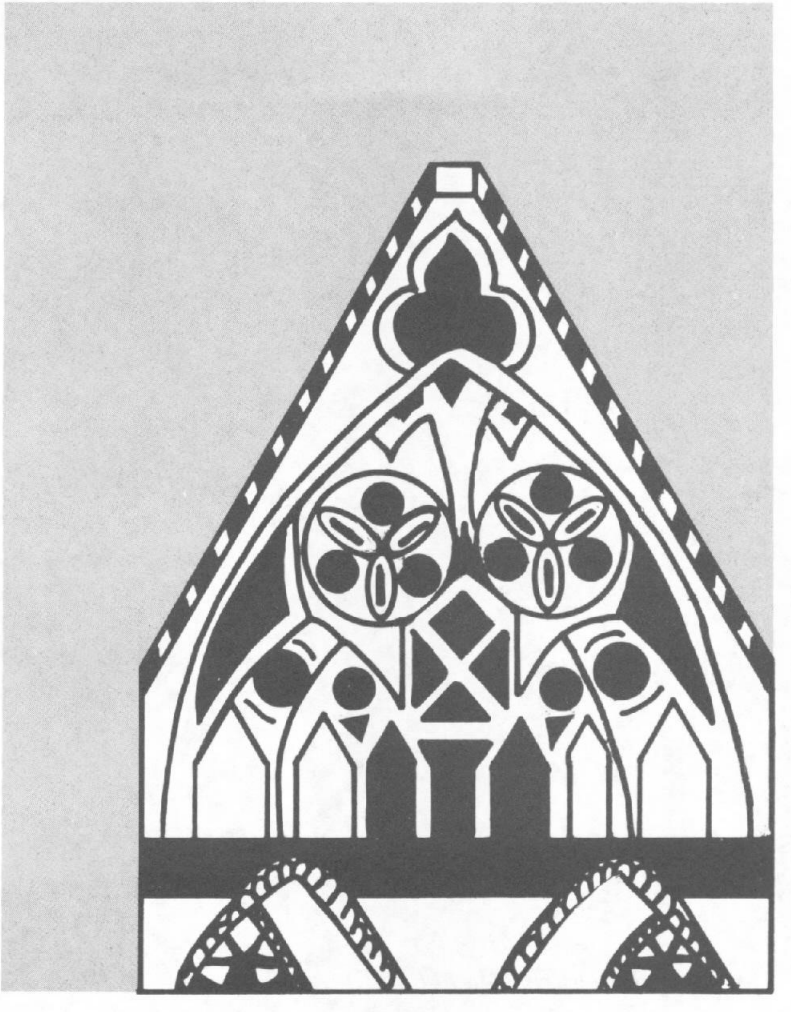
In early 1985 the governing coalition of Social Christians and Liberals had been in power for three years—long by contemporary Belgians standards (see Major Political Developments, 1980–84, ch. 4). This continuity of government suggested that the divisiveness of Belgian politics had subsided, at least temporarily, as the nation pulled together to combat the economic decline of the past decade and a half.

When Prime Minister Wilfried Martens visited the United States in January to explain his government's position on the deployment of cruise missiles, however, the complexity of Belgian politics seemed to befuddle the American public. Playing the role of the consummate Belgian politician, Martens issued apparently contradictory statements carefully tailored to the different audiences at home and abroad. Facing general elections by the end of the year, a slim majority in parliament, and fallout from his government's austerity measures, Martens seemed to be concerned that his unequivocal acceptance of the missiles on schedule might play into the hands of the Socialists. During the negotiations, however, there was never a question of Belgium's support for the NATO alliance. [Indeed, when the time came to act, the prime minister announced in March his government's final agreement to the installation of the missiles.] And, as in the past, a Socialist gain in the elections would most likely result in another coalition, perhaps between Martens' own Social Christians and the Socialists. Whatever the outcome of the elections, the pattern of elite compromise and the willingness of the populace to follow its lead on most issues would probably continue to preserve the Belgian nation through crisis and controversy.

February 1985 Stephen B. Wickman

Prime Minister Wilfried Martens talks with President Ronald Reagan, followed by Foreign Minister Leo Tindemans and Secretary of State George Shultz, in January 1985. Courtesy The White House/Pete Souza

Chapter 1. Historical Setting



Gothic architecture, Ghent (1325)

BELGIAN HISTORY IS a history of conflict and accommodation. The territory long served as the battlefield where the European balance of power was resolved. Its very existence as an independent nation from 1830 had to be sanctioned and protected by the European powers. Nevertheless, its own internal conflicts over economic benefits, social prestige, and political power have determined the development of Belgium's distinctive social and political system. A method of conflict management evolved that gathered all groups and issues into a unified and centralized system of consensual decisionmaking. The result was the fascinating paradox of a highly politicized society in which the individual was simultaneously remarkably acquiescent. The unitary parliamentary monarchy created in 1830–31 has survived sectarian conflict, populist protest movements, foreign occupation, and economic crisis, as well as challenges to the monarchy, parliament, and state unity.

The territory now known as Belgium has been unified and centralized for a relatively short period, slightly more than 150 years. For most of its history the area was a loose collection of municipalities and provinces that functioned more or less autonomously. Contact among them was limited; although they were important commercial centers, their trade was more often directed toward the rest of Europe than toward one another. Over the generations, residents of these areas developed an intense loyalty to their particular area and a fiercely independent spirit that confounded the attempts of successive foreign governments to impose a centralized state. Resistance to centralization intensified when policies were unpalatable, but the tug-of-war between the center and the provinces (even cities in some cases) for authority and power remained an essential dynamic of politics, and the provinces periodically reasserted their historic independence.

In the period since independence, Belgian history has been the product of the interplay of three societal cleavages. These cleavages emerged in different periods, raising sets of issues that for a time dominated the political scene. The first cleavage, over the relationship between the state and organized religion, dominated Belgian politics from about 1838 to 1884. It manifested itself in a bitter battle between Roman Catholics, anxious to defend and promote the traditional authority of their church in society and politics, and anticlericals, or Liberals—most often Freemasons—who were equally dedicated to maintaining a liberal democratic, secular, and "neutral", state. The battleground was the

educational system: the establishment of rival public and "free" (Catholic) primary and secondary schools. Tensions escalated, and mass mobilization in the form of street demonstrations, petitions to the king, and electoral politics made the issue a significant factor in the lives of most Belgians. The crisis was finally settled, in a remarkably amicable denouement to the venomous battle, by a pact among members of the political elite in 1884 guaranteeing the right of both systems of education to exist side by side.

Part of the reason for the sudden resolution of the seemingly intractable debate was the emergence of a second cleavage based upon socioeconomic factors. The political system was still controlled by a small "political class" composed of those few who qualified for the vote under the *régime censitaire* (restricted, property-based franchise). From about 1850, however, industrialization brought significant changes in the social structure, which had remained relatively static since the eighteenth century. The rise of the factory system (especially in Wallonia) led to the development of a trade union movement. The natural antipathy between employers and labor was exacerbated by the political system's denial of basic political rights (the right to vote, the right to organize) to the working class, despite Belgium's claim to being a democracy.

The labor movement, under the banner of socialism, sought to improve the life of the average worker first by social action—mutual aid societies to provide aid in times of illness, unemployment, or family crisis—and strikes, but it became clear that these activities could only ameliorate conditions, not change them. Finally, in the 1880s the leaders of the movement determined that only legislation would result in permanent and substantial change for labor. They founded the Belgian Workers Party in 1885 to work for the extension of the franchise and eventually social legislation.

As pressure mounted to democratize the political system, members of the elite freed themselves from the internecine struggle over the religious issue and turned their attention to the emerging labor offensive. The Socialists' activism galvanized the older political groupings into formally organized parties rather than the informal associations appropriate to a political system characterized by an "old boy network." These parties established elaborate social networks to rival the Socialists', enmeshing the "little man" into competing "spiritual families" (*French, familles spirituelles*). Only then was the franchise extended. Democratization was achieved without violence, the Socialist leaders were welcomed into the fraternity by the Catholic and Liberal elite,

and the party system was consolidated into the basic forum for political activity. The labor movement, through the Socialist party, achieved virtually all its goals, including the "welfare state," over the course of about 60 years (1885–1947).

The third cleavage, between French speakers and Dutch speakers, evolved slowly into a major political issue. Although a number of prominent Flemings demanded equal recognition of Dutch throughout the nineteenth century, the language question was placed on the political agenda during World War I, owing to Flemish militancy and the threat of mutiny among Flemish soldiers at the front. Throughout the 1920s the issue simmered, gaining strength among Flemings and prompting a reaction from the Walloons and other French speakers. After World War II, as the socioeconomic issue was settled, the language issue took center stage and dominated Belgian politics into the 1980s.

Despite the multiple cleavages and the intensity of passions aroused by them, Belgium has remained remarkably stable. This is owing in large part to the multifaceted role played by political parties. They have become three self-sufficient spiritual families, "pillars," or "worlds," enveloping each citizen in a cocoon of social relations. At the apex, the political party has overseen the internal life of the pillar and represented it in the political battles against rival pillars. These pillars have constituted the foundation for the entire system—political, social, and economic—and have served a number of crucial functions in maintaining stability.

The completeness of associational memberships within society guaranteed that the level of independent or disruptive activity among citizens would be very low. Every interest, every need—whether social, economic, or political—was funneled through an organization tied to a pillar. This gave the political parties enormous power to orchestrate public emotions and actions to achieve maximum effect in political struggles, while maintaining their ability to defuse crises rapidly by demobilizing their constituents. Thus, although the issues associated with the cleavages have all been very emotional, touching people's souls as well as pocketbooks, there has never been a time when the discipline inherent in the pillars was seriously threatened. At the same time, the pillar system separated antipathetic groups, keeping social contact to a minimum, ensuring that resolution of the conflict depended on the acts of the leaders, not on street violence.

Historically, the political parties have taken over issues and become champions of causes only after they have become popular, that is, when their constituencies have threatened to mobilize outside the pillars, for instance, by creating a rival party. The

leaders of the three major parties—the Social Christians, the Liberals, and the Socialists—have thus confined the conflicts to the normal tactics of parliamentary politics—primarily electoral politics but also the occasional mass demonstration (sanctioned, indeed organized, by the party leaders). (For the formal names of the three traditional political groupings (see Political Parties, ch. 4). The goal, of course, has been control of parliament and with it the authority to form the next government.

Throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the guiding principle in the parties' behavior was the stability of the system; any issue that threatened to get out of hand was tamed by being incorporated into the pillar system. It was in the best interests of the three major parties to retain their monopoly of political power even at the risk of undergoing internal changes, which happened in the 1960s and 1970s; if it was not possible to prevent rival parties from being formed, they accepted them, however reluctantly, into the system. The new parties, like the Socialists in the early twentieth century and the regional and linguistic parties in the 1970s, were thereby transformed from disruptive forces into parliamentary partners.

Management of the frequent conflicts in Belgium took place in a controlled and calm fashion. Although popular emotions might have brought a conflict initially to the fore, it was ultimately settled not by popular activity but by an agreement among party leaders that the issue had run its course, its importance for the electorate had diminished, and the time had come for it to be put aside. Every major conflict since independence has been settled by a pact among party leaders, drawn up after a few days' stay in one castle or another, where the essential problems were resolved in a mutually acceptable compromise. This kind of conciliatory spirit among leaders produced a system that withstood seemingly suicidal conflicts without a loss of social peace and stability. The success of this process has depended on the ability of the leaders of the various constituencies to control their followers.

The process, though remarkably effective at defusing political tensions, never addressed their root causes, the basic cleavages. The divisions within society never disappeared; they were merely managed. They cropped up again and again (like the religion and education issue) to be dealt with once more in the same way. There has been a discernible rhythm to Belgian history of about 50- to 60-year cycles, during which one or the other cleavage has held center stage. There has been a certain overlap. The labor movement evolved during the last 20 years of the religious crisis; likewise, the language movements developed during the

last 20 years of the socioeconomic issue. But there has never been a time when all three cleavages were politically prominent at the same time. This pattern of alternation of issues may have been coincidental, but it is likely that it was the result of the supremely organized system of social affiliations and control by the elite.

The system also depended on the crosscutting nature of the cleavages, which have historically undercut rather than reinforced each other's significance for the individual. The pillars, defined by political affiliation, contained members who were as different from each other as they were similar. For example, a Belgian Catholic was naturally tied to other Catholics because of a shared religion, but he or she was divided from some of them because of economic position, political affiliation, or language. As a result, no single issue could rally a homogeneous following that could identify itself as a thing apart from all others, and compromise was always possible.

Thus, although it was impossible to avoid conflicts, a system of managing those conflicts was constructed to minimize the risk to stability and social harmony. If the pattern continued to hold throughout the 1980s, the language issue, politically relevant since the 1920s and reaching a peak in the 1960s, might give way to another cleavage, most probably socioeconomic, which has become politically relevant since the dramatic economic downturn of the 1970s. Indeed, the expansion of the language issue to include regional devolution might be seen as merely the reemergence of the traditional struggle of local government against centralization rather than as a fundamental challenge to the existence of the Belgian state as it has been viewed by many.

There are many signs that the language cleavage lost its popular force during the 1970s: the incorporation of language parties into coalition governments since 1977, the apparent decline of the language issue's importance in the 1978 election, and the abortive Community Pact, usually referred to as the Egmont Pact, in 1978. There were also, however, several aspects of the language—now "community"—issue that troubled analysts. The failure of the pact may indicate that the regionalist cause has not in fact been captured by the party system and that the traditional form of compromise and cooperation among party leaders may not be sufficient to demobilize the electorate. The rise of the regionalist parties represented a challenge not only to the major political parties but also to their associated pillars. Many analysts believe that the pillar system may be slowly disintegrating. Finally, the economic crisis of the 1970s seemed to be differentiated by region, leaving the possibility that the language and

socioeconomic cleavages, formerly crosscutting, might begin to be superimposed on one another, creating a significantly more divisive and dangerous situation.

Early History

Roman Period, 57 B.C.-A.D. 431

Julius Caesar's account of his five-year war to subdue Gaul was the first written record of the area. Gaul, comprising most of present-day France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and parts of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), was inhabited by a collection of independent tribes, probably Celtic in origin, which Caesar divided into three groups. The Belgae, "the most courageous" of the three, probably lived in what is now Belgium (see fig. 2.)

The Romans considered southern Belgium important primarily as a defensive barrier against the Germanic invasions, but the area enjoyed about 400 years of prosperity and began its career as a commercial crossroads for Europe under their rule. Some native industries were fostered, such as clothmaking and wool manufacturing, and the presence of both iron ore and a rich source of charcoal (Forêt Charbonnière) made the area something of a manufacturing center, especially for weapons. Nevertheless, the economy was basically agricultural and was organized around a system of large landholdings, a precursor to the manorial system that characterized the Middle Ages.

Roman cultural influence, especially the spread of Latin as the language of commerce, had a deep impact on the future development of the society. Around the third century A.D. the Romans introduced Christianity, which eventually became the dominant religion. This religious movement merged with an administrative reorganization to divide the country into archbishoprics, which survived the Roman Empire and remained the principal urban centers and political units throughout the Middle Ages.

"Barbarian" invaders, Germanic tribes from the east and north, most notably the Franks, also arrived in the third century, cutting a swath of destruction and threatening Roman control. By the fifth century the Roman Empire was collapsing, and the Franks were replacing it in most of the region. This gradual process of change left a deep imprint on the area's cultural development and lies at the root of the linguistic bifurcation of the society. The language border paralleled the furthest extent of Roman occupation. South of the line, which began approximately at the city

Figure 2. Belgium in Its European Setting, 1984

of Maastricht in the east and ran westward south of Brussels and Lille to Boulogne on the coast, Latin took firm hold and subsequently evolved into French; north of the line the Germanic tribes overwhelmed the weak Roman influence and developed their own language, which ultimately became Flemish and Dutch.

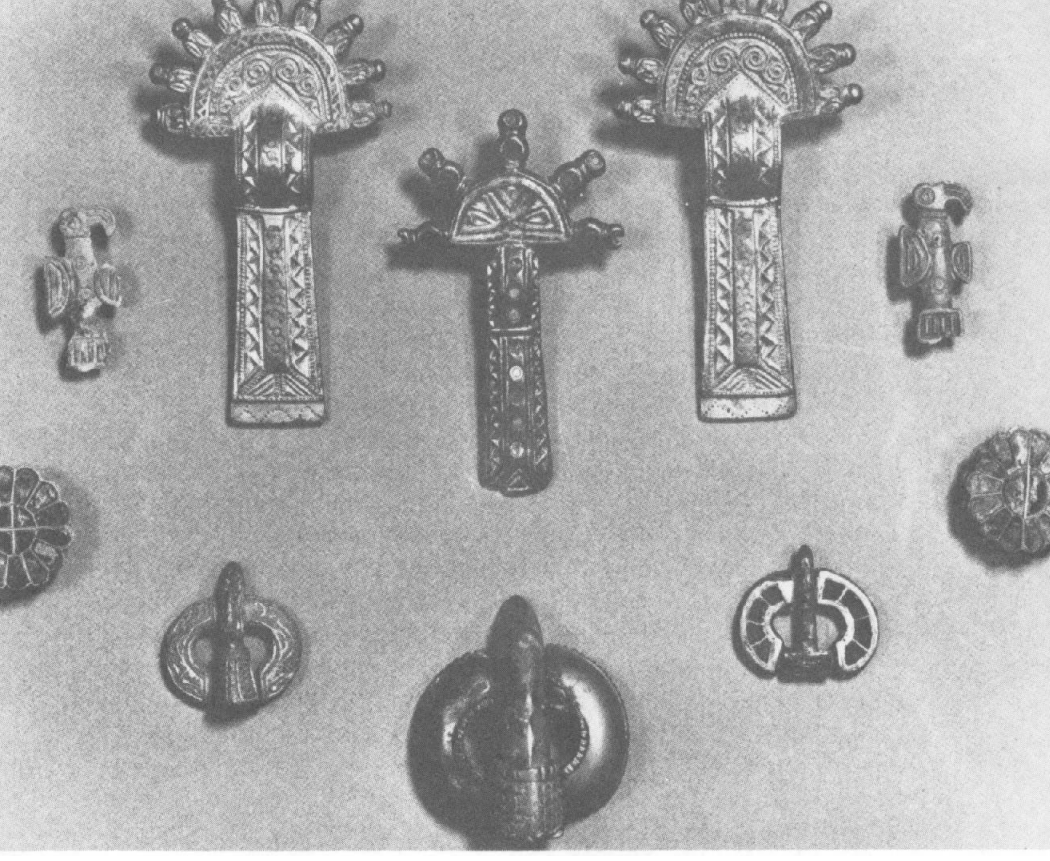
In late 1984 historians still debated why the Frankish invaders never crossed that line to challenge Roman influence. A number of explanations have been proposed, the most common being that the border marked the line of Roman fortifications, which held despite the empire's weakness. Others attributed the division to the existence of an almost impenetrable forest (Forêt Charbonnière), which prevented further Frankish movement south and sheltered the Romanized Belgae. Whatever the cause, the division of the society into Dutch-speaking Flemings and French-speaking Walloons dates from this period.

Frankish Period, A.D. 431–987

Unlike other Germanic tribes that swept back and forth across Europe, the Franks of this area did not migrate, and they gradually expanded the area under their control. Instead of overwhelming the vestiges of the Roman Empire, they came to an accommodation with it and to some extent were assimilated into it.

The Merovingian Empire (A.D. 431–751) was the first attempt to unite all the Franks under a single king. Under Clovis (481–511) the Merovingians expanded the area they controlled to encompass all of Gaul, and Paris made was the capital. Clovis' conversion to Christianity helped to reinvigorate the religion after decades of degeneration among the Franks and also to cement the relationship between the Frankish leadership and the Christian church. After his death, however, the kingdom was divided among his sons. Two centuries of confusion ensued, leading to the beginning of decentralization into feudalism (see Glossary).

The Carolingians, who followed in the 752–918 period, tried to reunite the empire and create a more effective, centralized state. Charlemagne, or Charles the Great (768–814), who was born in Liège, extended his control over most of western and central Europe. His system of government reinforced the trends toward a manorial economy and serfdom and made the area that became Belgium the center of European affairs. After his death, the empire was divided into France and the Holy Roman Empire (HRE), the latter roughly equivalent to greater Germany. The "Middle Kingdom" (the Lowlands, including Belgium) served as a buffer state between them.



Objects discovered in the Merovingian cemetery at Pry, Namur Province, dating to the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. Courtesy Belgium Information and Documentation Institute

Under the feudal system, which lasted about three centuries, the area was divided into separate principalities, dukedoms, and bishoprics, which, although nominally subject to either France or the HRE, were essentially independent after the twelfth century. A gradual process of economic change began, characterized by the emergence of a market economy, manufacturing, and towns as commercial centers. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the growth of industry and trade, particularly the wool trade and textile industry centered in Flanders, had undermined the agrarian feudal system. Merchants and manufacturers established themselves as a class of freemen between the feudal overlords and the serfs. As the new industrial and commercial centers grew, powerful merchant guilds (corporations) secured charters from feudal overlords for the establishment of law and municipal institutions. Cities such as Ieper, Ghent, and Brugge became functionally autonomous from the principalities.

During this period of rapid economic and social change, a rigid class system developed in the cities. The guilds held a virtual monopoly of both political and economic power. When serfdom was abolished in Flanders in the thirteenth century, a new class of workers and artisans developed, but it was denied the economic and civil benefits enjoyed by the merchant guilds under the new city charters. This explosive situation was exacerbated by the economic impact of war.

Because of its geographic location, the area, particularly Flanders, experienced a procession of foreign invasions and civil wars. The Hundred Years' War (1338–1453) between England and France was fought, in part, over control of Flanders, at that time a French fiefdom. In this intermittent but terribly costly war, many of the great cities of Flanders, especially Ieper, "existed in the midst of literally perpetual warfare, a state of things which continued through the Middle Ages and down to modern times." Both England and France alternately held hostage Flemish industry and trade. Revolts broke out in Brugge, Ghent, Ieper, Liège, the province of Brabant, and elsewhere throughout the fourteenth century, merging into a widespread "democratic movement." In response, a new system of government was established, which was led by the Estates (see Glossary), provincial assemblies having proportional representation for the clergy, the nobility, and the masters of urban craft guilds.

Burgundian Period, 1384–1555

In the late fourteenth century the Lowlands came under the political hegemony of the dukes of Burgundy. Under their reign the economy flourished, and the area experienced a "Golden Age" of scholarship, culture, and commerce. Through a series of strategic marriages, purchases, and some conquests, the Burgundians expanded the territory under their control until by the mid-sixteenth century it included the 17 Provinces of the Lowlands (the "Burgundian Circle"), excluding only Liège, which remained an independent prince-bishopric.

The bulk of the acquisitions occurred under Philip the Good (1419–1467), whose goal was not only to bring these territories under one house but also, more importantly, to create unity out of the chaos. By this time the Lowlands were divided not only into provinces but also into innumerable independent towns and even into warring factions within the towns. Civil unrest was endemic, and foreign invasions, or the threat of invasion, were continuous. Trade remained remarkably vital but was beginning to show signs of faltering.

Philip succeeded in overcoming this factionalism in a long process, punctuated by periodic resistance (sometimes quite energetic) and involving compromise along the way. The tradition of local independence was sufficiently ingrained that Philip had to give way and accept a system of shared administrative responsibilities. In 1463 he was pursuaded to set up the States-General, a kind of proto-parliament made up of delegates chosen by the provincial Estates and invested with what amounted to veto power over questions of taxes and war. This and other bodies had extremely limited powers under the Burgundians, but they would come back to haunt future monarchs.

The resulting peace brought a renewed economic boom of unprecedented proportions. The provinces, particularly Flanders, became the richest lands in the Western world; Brugge, known as the "Venice of the North," became one of Europe's busiest ports as well as a banking and trading center. As this port silted up, Antwerp took its place, and Brussels became a glittering city attracting foreign noblemen to the ducal court.

A cultural flowering developed in tandem with the economic surge in these cities. "Flemish Schools" dominated the arts during this period. Hubert and Jan Van Eyck, Hans Memling, Hieronymous Bosch, and Pieter Breughel the Elder created a new style in painting, exploring worldly themes as well as the traditional sacred ones; Josquin des Prés and Orlando di Lasso developed the polyphonic style that dominated sixteenth-century Renaissance music; and Jean Froissart, Philippe de Commynes, and Erasmus were influential in literature.

Foreign Domination

Spanish Netherlands, 1555–1731

The Burgundian period ended in 1555 after the abdication of Charles V (1519–55) in favor of his son, Philip II of Spain (1555–98). Charles V had inherited not only the Burgundian territories but also the territories of the Habsburg family, the foremost royal family of the period. He was therefore ruler not only of the 17 Provinces of the Lowlands but also of the HRE and Spain. He was also an extremely devout Roman Catholic, and after 30 years in power he decided to enter a monastery. He divided his empire, giving Spain and the 17 Provinces (henceforth the Spanish Netherlands) to Philip with the admonition to continue his work in defense of the faith against Protestantism.

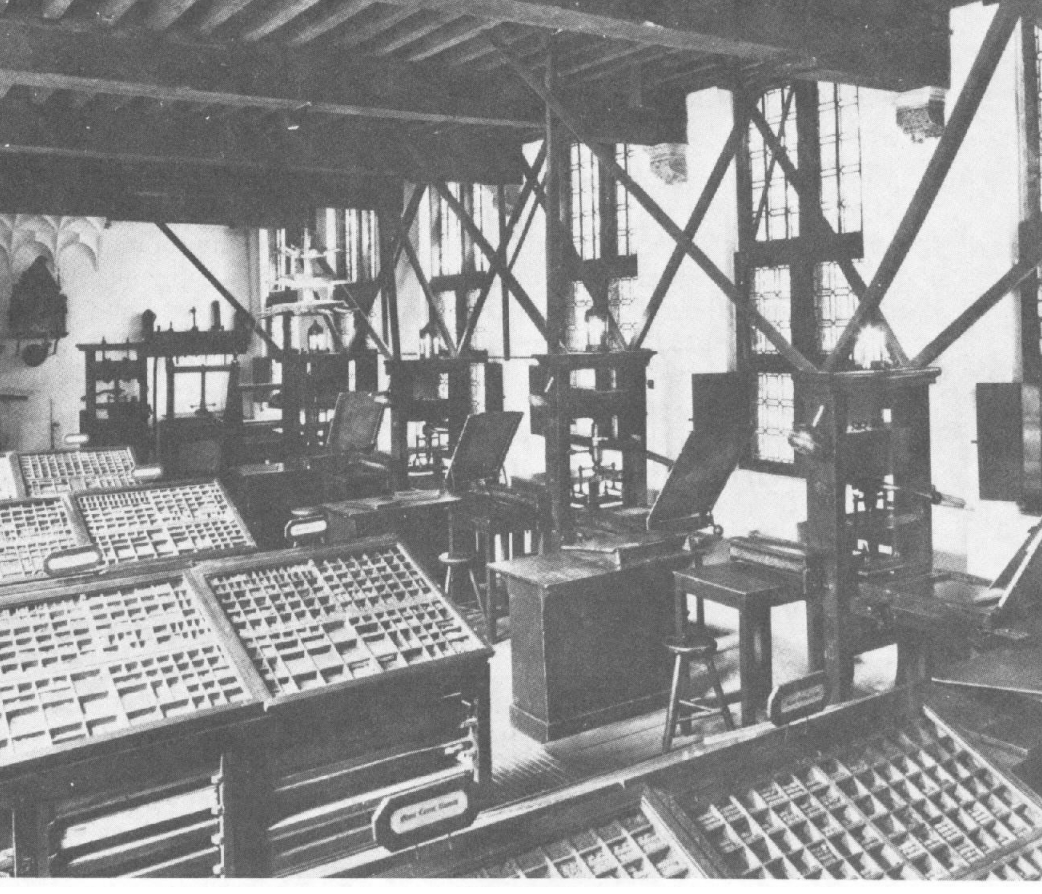
Beginning about 30 years earlier, the Reformation had swept

through northern Europe. Its ideas of democracy and self-rule took hold in the seven northern provinces of the Lowlands. Philip was also fervently, perhaps fanatically, devoted to Roman Catholicism. The spread of Protestantism was a double threat to him: first, as an attack on his religion; second, as an attack on his legitimacy as absolute monarch. Either would have been reason enough to provoke a strong response, but both together produced a violent overreaction that resulted in civil war.

The Inquisition, that was unleashed in the Spanish Netherlands was seen there at first as primarily a political event, an attempt to end the historical autonomy of cities. The religious aspect served only to exacerbate and envenom the dispute. Philip, initially accepted without question as the rightful heir, quickly alienated his subjects by his complete disdain for Burgundian traditions. He could not speak Dutch and spoke only very bad French. (His native tongue was Spanish.) He ruled through "foreign," that is, Castilian, dukes rather than the traditional local leaders; consistently violated the rights of the Estates and the cities; and never again set foot in the provinces after the first four years of his reign.

Discontent seethed for years and finally broke out in 1567. When a year later the duke of Alba, charged with carrying out a purge, executed scores of the noblemen who had led the revolt, the fight was transformed overnight from a dispute into an outright rebellion. A series of Spanish governors tried to restore order. Their efforts were ultimately successful in the 10 southern provinces, but only after years of fighting. In 1576 the States-General adopted the Pacification of Ghent, an accord between the northern provinces of Holland and Zeeland and the southern provinces to unify the rebellion under the leadership of the prince of Orange. The religious question was left unsettled, but the "reformed religion" (Protestantism) remained, at least for a time, the only authorized form of religion in Holland and Zeeland.

In 1579 the Walloon (French-speaking) southern provinces rallied in defense of Roman Catholicism and reestablished ties with Spain. In response, the seven northern provinces and the principal cities of the south (mostly in Flanders) concluded the Union of Utrecht to defend their liberties. By 1585 Flanders was won back by the Spanish, though at great cost, especially during the siege of Antwerp. The name *Spanish Netherlands* henceforth referred only to the Roman Catholic southern provinces (later to become Belgium) to distinguish them from the largely Protestant and independent United Provinces of the Netherlands in the north (commonly known as Holland). The battle then became less



Printing house in Antwerp founded in 1550 by Frenchman Christophe Plantin
Courtesy Belgium Information and Documentation Institute

political and more religious.

Following Philip's death in 1598 Spain began a slow decline, which left the Spanish Netherlands increasingly defenseless. They became the battleground for European conflicts stemming from a general realignment of the continental balance of power. Spain continued its attempt to reclaim the northern provinces, but by 1648 it could no longer pursue the conflict and signed the Treaty of Münster, which at last recognized the independence of the United Provinces of the Netherlands. Although it stopped the war, the treaty was an economic disaster for the southern provinces because it ceded to Holland their rights to the mouth of the Schelde River, thereby sealing off their only major seaport.

Meanwhile, the situation was complicated by French claims to the whole area under the expansionism of Louis XIV (1643–1715). Holland, despite its size a major actor during this time, be-

came something of an obsession with Louis; he invaded it and the southern provinces a number of times during the 1670–1700 period. In 1697 the Treaty of Ryswick, part of the reequilibration of power, ended one of these incursions but gave the Spanish Netherlands the role of perpetual barrier between France and Holland. It was to be garrisoned by the Dutch but paid for by the Spanish Netherlands.

Spanish rule proved to be disasterous for the southern provinces. They were considered important only as a strategic outpost, and their religious loyalty was crucial, but their economic health was irrelevant except insofar as they (along with colonies of the New World) helped to defray the costs of Spain's quest for hegemony in Europe. At the end of Philip's reign, the area was economically devastated: thieves roamed freely, agriculture was disrupted, and commerce stopped in many places. Many of the largest towns lost one-third of their population to war, disease, and famine. Antwerp, a major port, and Brussels, the cultural and commercial center, were destroyed in periodic bombardments by both the Spanish and the French. The famous and elegant cities of Flanders and Brabant became "mere dens of thieves and beggars," and what had formerly been "a land common to all nations" now became "a miserable blind alley—a road with no outlet."

Politically, however, the period was not quite so dismal, though things were bad enough. Its most important legacy was the survival and reinforcement of the ancient independence and self-government of the cities and provinces. Despite an all-out attack, most of the traditional privileges remained. In fact, Liège remained independent throughout this period. The beginning of Belgian nationalism, can also be seen. "Belgique" was commonly used to describe the general area, often including the northern provinces, but by the eighteenth century the southern provinces were often called "Belgium" and the northern provinces "Holland."

At the same time, it was recognized that two distinct "races," the Flemings and Walloons, inhabited the area. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that linguistic differences between them intensified. Under the later Burgundian dukes, all oaths of office in the northern provinces had been taken in Flemish, but under Philip II, French became the administrative language of the entire area. The language frontier between the Dutch-speaking areas in the north and the French-speaking south was also reinforced by the northward migration of Protestants during the Inquisition.

Culturally, the era was no less bleak. Only painting managed to retain some of its former glory during the reign of Isabelle and Albert (1598–1621), when Pierre-Paul Rubens and Antoine Van Dyck remained for a time in Belgium. But they, like most intellectuals, skilled artisans, and many traders fled abroad—many to Holland, where the first half of the seventeenth century saw a flowering of Dutch culture in art, literature, and commerce owing, at least in some part, to the exiles from the south.

The War of the Spanish Succession (1701–13), provoked by the dying out of the Spanish royal family, was a European-wide contest for the Spanish throne. It was finally settled by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, which also resolved many of the lingering problems throughout the continent and restored a balance of power among the leading nations (Britain, France, Spain, Austria, and the HRE). The Spanish Netherlands served as a handy tool in this process by being shifted from the Spanish branch of the Habsburg family to the Austrian branch. For the rest of the century, the Spanish Netherlands were the Austrian Netherlands.

Austrian Netherlands, 1713–95

The Austrian period began quietly, even auspiciously, but despite the best intentions of the new rulers, Belgium once again fell victim to European politics. The new governor, the marquis of Prie, attempted to restore Belgian trade by developing the port of Oostende and establishing the Imperial and Royal Company of the East and West Indies. The port's very success as a competitor, however, forced Britain and Holland to demand its closure in 1731 as the price for their acceptance of the Pragmatic Sanction, by which Emperor Charles VI of Austria tried to make the other powers accept his daughter, Maria-Theresa, as successor. Despite his acceptance of these terms, at his death in 1740 the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–48) once again brought war to the Belgian provinces. After eight years of fighting, Maria-Theresa's right to the throne was upheld.

Her rule for the next 40 years (1740–80) brought welcome peace and renewed economic prosperity. Maria-Theresa was the foremost European "enlightened despot," a monarch who subscribed to the Enlightenment idea that her function was to ensure the peace, tranquillity, and moral and economic development of her subjects. By her skillful diplomacy she was able to keep Belgium out of the Seven Years' War (1756–63) and used the luxury of uninterrupted peace to promote a gradual program of social and economic progress. Some of the more barbaric common practices

(branding and torture, for example) were prohibited, prisons were reformed, and workhouses were established for the poor. Industry and agriculture were developed. Education, a crucial aspect of Enlightenment policies, was secularized and modernized in the secondary schools and universities for the nobility and the wealthy merchants. Similar efforts on behalf of the masses, almost universally illiterate, foundered on the resistance of both the church and the elite, who were anxious to retain social dominance. Finally, Maria-Theresa supported the arts and sciences, establishing the Royal Academy of Science and Letters.

Her son and successor, Joseph II (1780–90), though he shared ideas of the Enlightenment, was much more ambitious and impatient. He was also remarkably insensitive to the traditions of his Belgian subjects. Austere and rather tactless, he valued efficiency and rationality above all else and promptly went about making a dazzling array of changes in the administrative structure of the provinces, the judiciary, and even holiday customs. He promoted coastal trade and won some concessions from the Dutch on the status of the Schelde River, though he failed to end its closure. He did, however, end Dutch garrisoning and destroyed the barrier fortresses that had been part of the Treaty of Ryswick.

His efforts to end Dutch occupation were appreciated, but the goodwill engendered by them did nothing to lessen Belgian indignation at the Austrian assault on provincial and town rights. Over the course of 75 years, but especially under Joseph, the Austrian monarchy had tried to impose centralization and absolute control, threatening the powers of local governments and the ancient social hierarchy of the Estates, the Roman Catholic Church, the nobility, and the medieval guilds. By 1789 this indignation exploded into open revolt, producing the Brabant Revolution.

Brabant Revolution, 1789–90

Spurred on by the French revolutionary example, Belgian patriots, after years of intermittent resistance, began to organize in earnest. The opposition was composed of two groups, the Statists and the Democrats. The Statists, led by Hendrik Van der Noot, a lawyer of noble birth, represented the traditional Estates, especially the conservative landed aristocracy, who bitterly opposed the social and economic reforms of the enlightened Austrians. Their goal was to establish an independent "Belgian Confederacy" to be dominated by the provincial Estates, thus maintaining the existing social and political hierarchy.

The second group, the Democrats, or Vonckists, headed by

J.F. Vonck, a liberal lawyer, was made up of the new classes: the commercial middle class, professionals (doctors and lawyers—members of the "liberal professions"), and intellectuals, who had been shut out from positions of political power. They hoped to create a "liberal-democratic" national state based on personal freedom, economic liberalism, and popular sovereignty, thereby ending the political monopoly of the Estates and the church.

Vonck called for a popular uprising, and thousands of men from all sectors of the population and all parts of the country responded, gathering in Holland to form the Patriotic Army. In October 1789 they invaded Belgium, took Ghent, and by December controlled Brussels.

On January 10, 1790, the States-General met at Brussels and proclaimed the creation of the independent United States of Belgium. The new constitution was based on the American Articles of Confederation, themselves based on the Dutch Union of Utrecht of 1579. The new union quickly fell apart, however, under the weight of the basic conflict between the liberal democratic Vonckists and the conservative Statists. This conflict assumed the proportions of civil war in March and April 1790. The Statists won, and the new state became a confederation of provinces, leaving the traditional political powers intact. The Vonckists were (unjustly) accused of anticlericalism, and an army of peasants, perhaps as many as 100,000 strong and led by Roman Catholic priests, marched through Brussels, declaring their loyalty to the Estates and their hatred of the Enlightenment.

The Brabant Revolution was an unusual mix of ages and ideas. It began as a modern democratic movement, was defeated by a conservative resurgence (remarkably similar to the sixteenth-century revolt against Spain), and finally was used by the church in a medieval crusade to solidify its social and political dominance. This internal confusion allowed the Austrians easily to crush the rebellion in December 1790.

French Annexation, 1795–1814

The Austrians lost control of Belgium when the French revolutionary armies swept across Europe, formally annexing the Austrian Netherlands to France in October 1795. The Belgians initially welcomed the French as liberators and looked forward to a new life as an independent nation. Those hopes were, however, quickly dashed as the French made clear that Belgium was what they called a "conquered territory to be milked with all speed."

There were brief periods of active resistance to French occupation, the most significant being a peasant rebellion—complete

with a roving army of about 10,000 men—prompted by the introduction of conscription in 1798. The rebellion was crushed within two months. Afterward, the Belgian population sank into a miserable apathy punctuated by periodic outbursts of directionless anger. Political and public life stagnated for the next 20 years.

Despite the unfavorable circumstances, the French achieved an administrative reorganization, making government both more efficient and cheaper, and broke the hold of the old Estates on the political system. The economic and political fortunes of the emerging middle class were improved. Prices rose rapidly, but workers' wages did not keep pace, and the resultant increase in profits gave entrepreneurs capital to invest in new enterprises and in real estate. The French revolutionaries, violently anticlerical and anxious to break the power of the church, sold church land (equal to about one-half of the total Belgian territory), most of it to the new class. This redistribution of wealth between classes also represented a shift between provinces, from Flanders to Wallonia, and contributed to a reversal of the economic relationship between the two areas. This dramatic increase in capital resources, together with the push given by Napoleon to Belgian manufacturing, especially Liège's arms industry, laid the groundwork for the industrial revolution that began in Wallonia about 1850. Belgium was the first continental nation to industrialize, and it retained its industrial primacy until the end of the century.

The peasants and workers, meanwhile, in whose name the revolution was fought, gained nothing and in many cases lost much. Prices outpaced wages, and after 1810 a severe economic depression, which affected the lower classes disproportionately, further widened the gap between the classes. A new social and political structure, less stable and more stratified, emerged. The nobility and the church retained most of their power and prestige, although no longer unchallenged, but the emerging middle class (lawyers, doctors, and wealthy merchants—the "local notables") became increasingly powerful.

The social structure was also transformed by the imposition of French as the language of upward mobility but was accessible only to those Flemings already wealthy enough to afford private education. The language policy of the occupation regime reinforced class divisions, crippled Dutch as a cultural force, and con-

"Lion Monument" commemorating the Battle of Waterloo, where Napoleon was defeated on June 18, 1815, in Brabant Province
Courtesy Belgium Information and Documentation Institute

demned Flanders to a subordinate position in an overwhelmingly French-speaking system.

Kingdom of the United Netherlands, 1815–30

The disintegration of Napoleon's empire and his final defeat in the Battle of Waterloo (just south of Brussels) in 1815 put Belgium's fate once again in the hands of European diplomats. There was little sentiment for independence, either among the great powers or among members of Belgium's elite. There was, however, a choice to be made between reuniting with Austria or forming a new association with the northern Netherlands. The beneficiaries of the new order—the middle-class merchants, businessmen, and members of the liberal professions (the old Vonckists, now known as the Liberals)—were anxious to preserve their new status and preferred a union with the north.

At the Congress of Vienna (1814–15) the great powers—Britain, Austria, Prussia, Russia, and France—redrew the map of

Europe and established the Kingdom of the United Netherlands to serve once again as a permanent barrier to French expansion. William of Orange was named king.

If few in Belgium protested the creation of the new state, neither was it greeted with any great enthusiasm. The only group that openly supported it was the Liberals. Since the debacle of the Brabant Revolution, for which they blamed the clergy, they were increasingly anticlerical and welcomed a secular or, if necessary, Protestant alternative to the overweening dominance of the Roman Catholic Church. As businessmen, they also stood to gain from William's vigorous policies, which brought prosperity and the development of Belgian industry and infrastructure (canals, roadways, and the ports of Oostende, Nieuwpoort, and Antwerp).

Those who objected to the union pointed to a number of perceived inequities. Belgians had to assume one-half the national debt, even though Holland had entered the union with an indebtedness many times larger than Belgium's. Seats in the legislature were apportioned equally, although Belgium's population outnumbered Holland's by more than 1 million. But most importantly, Catholics and the clergy feared rule by a Dutch Calvinist, believing he would inevitably try to impose Protestantism on the almost exclusively Roman Catholic society.

The union endured an uneasy tension that seemed to be stabilizing until William attempted to reform the educational system to match that of the north. As long as his reforms remained limited to primary education, they met with little interest or resistance. The new system—free, mandatory, and secular—was in fact a significant achievement, reducing the illiteracy rate from 60 percent of the population to about 50 percent in 1830. At the same time, by replacing French with Dutch as the language of instruction, the schools served his campaign to "Dutchify" Flanders. However, extension of these policies to the secondary schools, the training ground for the nobility and the middle class, brought a storm of protest. Catholics objected to the secularization of education as a veiled attempt to inject Protestantism into Belgian society and to undermine the church's social role. Members of the Flemish middle class feared that their children, no longer educated in French, would be excluded from the French-speaking power centers. The Walloon middle class, on the other hand, feared that the "Dutchification" of education and administration would result in the subordination of French speakers to Dutch speakers. Liberals reacted against this assault on the traditional liberties of individuals and regions.

Instead of winning over the factions, William alienated each in succession and provoked both Flemings and Walloons, whether Roman Catholic or Liberal, into a unified protest movement. His reforms touched the raw nerves of Belgian society: the Fleming-Walloon question, the Catholic-Liberal contest for the nation's soul, and the historical independence of the regions. He needed all of these groups if he was to succeed, especially the Catholics, who made up the vast majority. For his educational reforms he needed Liberal support against Catholic reaction and the support of the communes (municipalities), which had to pay for the reforms. Rather than recognize these political realities and accommodate himself to them, William lashed out against them, banishing his most vocal critics and restricting freedom of the press and association.

The Revolution of 1830

Although drawn together by the political situation, the two leading groups, Roman Catholics and Liberals, remained separated on the question of the relationship of the state and religion. It took the moderating impact of Romanticism and the perception of a common enemy to overcome their mutual hostility. They found a common rallying point in the romantic ideal of nationalism, according to which all divisions in society were subordinate to the one overarching commonality: membership in the Belgian nation. Therefore both clericalism and Liberalism became more moderate, and mutual accommodation in the face of a common alien enemy became the first duty. They could agree on an expanded definition of Liberalism, one that included freedom of religion and education, freedom of the press and association, and a more responsible and responsive democracy.

The Union of Oppositions, linking the leaders of Roman Catholics and secular Liberals, was formed in 1828 to protest William's actions and ask for limited constitutional reforms. This was very much a movement of the French-speaking upper classes, but they began to enlist popular support for their petition protest which was meant to convey to the Dutch the extent of discontent. According to Dutch historian E.H. Kossmann, owing largely to the efforts of the clergy in the Flemish countryside, in three months over 350,000 people "by putting their signature—or in thousands of cases—just a cross under the petitions, manifested their desire to free the press which they could not read, the schools which they did not attend, and a language which they did not understand."

The limited reform proposals were outpaced by growing

popular unrest caused by a serious economic downturn. The winter of 1829–30 had been particularly severe, devastating agriculture. The manufacturing sector was no better off, and bankruptcies and unemployment were mounting. The working class became increasingly restive. Public demonstrations became more common and finally burst into violence on August 25, 1830. Workers, in a fit of apparently spontaneous anger, began attacking factories and homes of the leading citizens of Brussels, Liège, and other cities. Immediately, the Brussels middle class, convinced that the Dutch government lacked both the will and the means to quell the violence, set up a civil guard to restore order. Within three days the riots were over. These events were replicated throughout Belgium in August and September.

The bourgeoisie now controlled most cities in Belgium. Convinced that with some changes the union with the north could be advantageous to their economic development, they remained eager to compromise and hoped to use the circumstances to persuade the Dutch government to reform the state. But the Dutch, unwilling to discuss reform, sent in troops and transformed the disturbances into precisely the nationalist revolution they had feared for years.

The Kingdom of Belgium

On September 25, 1830, the provisional government was formed, and on October 4 it declared the independence of Belgium. Elections were held a month later for the National Congress. The 299 delegates chosen, evenly divided between Catholics and Liberals, were charged with drawing up a constitution and a new system of government. The Constitution was ratified on February 7, 1831, and established a constitutional monarchy having a bicameral parliament, direct election, and guarantees of personal liberties. After some negotiation, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg (a German principality) was elected "King of the Belgians" and assumed the throne on July 21, 1831."

The king's role was limited to those powers granted specifically by the Constitution and the laws passed by parliament. Only in his capacity as commander of the armed forces (then in sorry shape indeed despite the threat from Holland) did he have any personal authority. Leopold was an inspired choice for the position. Unlike the other candidates, Leopold brought with him important diplomatic advantages. Widower of its heiress apparent and former guardian of Queen Victoria, he was eminently accept-

able to the British court—a fact that the Belgians hoped would guarantee British protection. A year after his acceptance of the throne he consolidated relations to the south by marrying the daughter of Louis-Philippe of France. In addition, he was an attractive candidate in terms of the domestic political situation. Schooled in the British court, he seemed comfortable with the restricted role of the king in the new system. And as a Protestant he would not be embroiled in the spiritual war in Belgium between the Catholics and Liberals.

Meanwhile, William called upon the European powers to force Belgium to abide by the 1815 agreement and return to the Kingdom of the United Netherlands. The London Conference, convened in October 1830, though sympathetic with the Dutch king's cause, recognized Belgian independence on January 20, 1831, and drew up an agreement to be signed by the two parties. William rejected the conference's decision and continued to press for reunification. In August 1831 Dutch troops invaded Belgium, easily winning the battle in the field but destroying William's credibility in London. He finally accepted a revised peace treaty in 1839. Although Belgian autonomy was finally guaranteed, the treaty required that Belgium remain "perpetually neutral," thus ensuring its continuation as a buffer state.

Consolidation of the System

The Religious Cleavage: Development of the Party System

The revolution that created Belgium was a nationalist political rebellion rather than a social revolution. Although fueled by popular support, it was an action that created a state of, by, and for the elite—almost exclusively French-speaking. Although its *régime censitaire* was the most democratic in Europe, the franchise was determined according to a minimum property qualification, giving the vote to at most about 11 percent of the adult male population. The new state was, therefore, fundamentally conservative and dominated by the nobility, wealthy businessmen, and members of the liberal professions.

The threat of invasion from the north remained a critical factor in Belgian politics until William's acceptance of the peace treaty in 1839 and helped to consolidate the young state despite the multitude of conflicting forces within it. The political alliance of Catholics and Liberals forged in 1828, called unionism, stayed in force for the duration of the threat and produced the framework of the new state, including the regulation of relations between the

national government and the local governments, which allowed virtual self-government to the largest towns and a measure of autonomy to the provinces.

The Catholic and Liberal groups were bound by a common conservative orientation rather than formal doctrine or organization. They were "spiritual families," not organized and disciplined parties, although the word *party* was often used to describe the informal associations. During the 1830–47 period, their membership was limited to a small percentage of the total population. They included, however, almost the whole of the Belgian electorate—some 97 percent of about 46,000 men—from 1830 until the expansion of the franchise in 1893. They might more appropriately be called "factions" of the small ruling class—the wealthy, well-educated local notables.

Nationally, their support was roughly equal and stable, but there were wide variations within regions: the Catholics being strongest in Flanders, the Liberals in Wallonia. Although electoral data are scarce for this early period, it is generally assumed that the Catholic vote tended to be centered in the Flemish countryside, while the Liberals received most of their support from the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie. Given the fluidity of the situation, it is difficult to determine with any exactitude the relative strengths of the two groups. The best estimate is that of the 200 members of parliament, about one-third were Liberals, one-third Catholics, and the remainder a hazy combination of the two.

Catholics were tied together through church organizations, and the clergy often served as leaders of the group. Liberals tended to be Freemasons and therefore anticlerical; Masonic lodges frequently organized electoral campaigns against the clergy, particularly in local elections, which were often more partisan than national elections. Despite their significant philosophical disagreements, however, the two groups cooperated in the interest of their common good.

Both groups considered the constitutional compromise worked out in 1831 to be moderate and philosophically acceptable. The Liberals firmly believed in the necessity of a "neutral" secular state that guaranteed the freedom of association and the press, as well as freedom of religion and education. Their anticlericalism concerned the public role of the church; as long as its activities were limited to its religious role, even in education, they were legitimate and could not be interfered with by the state. At the same time, the state was not to be an agent of the Roman Catholic Church or any other ideology. The church, for its

part, derived considerable benefit from the Constitution: a guarantee of freedom from state interference in either its internal organization or its relationship with the Vatican, freedom of education permitting independent Catholic schools (under some circumstances even financed with public funds), and state salaries for the clergy.

In addition, the political alliance of Catholics and Liberals was good for economic development. The 1830s brought a huge leap in investment in industrial development (including the Cockerill metalworks), railroad construction (the first on the continent), mine exploitation, and banking. A war scare in 1838–39 brought the boom to a halt, but the expansion helped to convince the industrial leaders, many of whom had opposed the revolution, that the new state could be as good for business as the union with the north had been.

The alliance ended after the Dutch acceptance of the peace treaty in 1839, but Catholics and Liberals remained in essential coalition for another eight years, presenting joint election lists and sharing government control. Relations between them, however, became increasingly strained. In 1838, following a papal injunction for Belgian bishops to take a more active role in the society and combat the pernicious effects of secularism, the bishops condemned the Freemasons and forbade any Catholic from being a member on pain of excommunication. Both sides accused the other of abusing the freedoms granted under the Constitution. The church understood the balance between church and state to be one of "mutual benevolence," leaving the clergy primarily responsible for education and social welfare. Liberals, stung by the church's campaign against Freemasonry and secularism in general, saw this new activism as a violation of the constitutional agreement. Liberal rhetoric became increasingly anti-Catholic and extreme, advocating the complete subjugation of the church to the state and the laicization of all public institutions, including education, public welfare services, and even cemeteries.

As the battle of words became more bitter, Liberals, and later Catholics, decided to organize formal political parties to broaden the arsenal of available weapons. In 1841 a Liberal association, L'Alliance, was founded at Brussels, and from 1843 on the Liberals, though still not disciplined, were at least more closely aligned than before. They made substantial electoral gains in the 1845 election. But the history of the Liberal Party really began in June 1846, when for the first time the Liberal associations, which had been in informal federation, convened a congress in Brussels that produced a manifesto detailing for the first

time a coherent platform. The goals outlined were the curtailing or ending of the influence of outside pressure, i.e., the Roman Catholic Church, on government and administration; liberation of the ordinary clergy from the "dictatorship" of ecclesiastical authorities in nonreligious matters; complete freedom of religion; electoral reform to extend the franchise to the constitutional limit, i.e., a slight decrease in the minimum property qualification to include the next layer of middle class; limitation of the power of the state to interfere with individual liberty; educational reform; and protection of the free-market economy.

Thereafter, the Liberal and Catholic positions became more rigid, and the battle for control of the society and political system intensified and dominated Belgian politics for the next 40 years. The Liberal spiritual family, however, was not without its internal problems. A radical wing became increasingly influential in Liberal Party circles during the 1850s and captured the party in the 1860s. The Radicals, unlike the older, more moderate faction, the "Doctrinaires," wanted to destroy the influence of the church, not just in public affairs but in all aspects of society. They went beyond anticlericalism to antireligion and saw Roman Catholicism as anachronistic, morally dangerous and, most important, the principal obstacle to social and economic progress. A leading Radical announced in 1864: "A corpse lies on the earth, barring the road to progress. This corpse of the past, to call it bluntly by its name. . .is catholicism."

The growing strength of the Liberal Party and the intensification of its anticlericalism persuaded many Catholic leaders that a more unified defense of the church's role was necessary. The church continued to provide the organizational center for Catholics, and it was not until 1852 and 1858 that any serious attempts were made to establish an autonomous political wing. Both attempts failed, largely because of internal splits within the Catholic camp. In 1864 the Liberal government resigned, and the king asked the Catholics to present a program for his consideration. This was the first Roman Catholic political program in Belgian history, but it had to compromise between the views of two factions that split the spiritual family during the 1860–79 period over the moral justification of the Constitution. "Progressive liberal Catholics," mostly the Catholic members of parliament, wanted to preserve the 1830 system. They felt comfortable with the Liberals and rejected the hints of popular democracy that were creeping into the political system; indeed, they wanted to be equally independent of the people and of the church hierarchy.

In the opposite corner were the Ultramontanes, who wanted

to abandon the neutral state set up in 1830 and establish (or reestablish) a Catholic state subordinate to the Roman Catholic Church and ultimately to the pope. They envisioned a corporatist society (see Glossary). These views were actively encouraged by Pope Pius IX, who detested parliamentary democracy on principle, and enjoyed a wide audience in the 1860s and 1870s among the lower ranks of the clergy. Pope Pius died in 1878 and was succeeded by Leo XIII, who told Belgian Catholics to put aside their differences and work together to defeat the Liberals within the constitutional system. Despite its faults, the system was basically "favorable to the Church" and Catholics "must not only refrain from attacking, they must also defend, the Constitution."

Both camps were poised for a confrontation on the issue of church-state relations. Once again the schools became the center of a political contest.

The First School Conflict, 1879–84

Educational policy was historically a volatile issue in Belgian politics. Attempts by previous regimes to intervene in the secondary schools prompted both the Brabant Revolution and the Revolution of 1830. Similarly, in the mid-nineteenth century, education became the catalyst for war between Catholics and Liberals.

In 1842 primary-school legislation codified the church-state partnership that had existed since the founding of the state. In practical terms it legitimated the church's dominance of primary education and appeared to satisfy everyone. However, the Liberals who came to power in 1847, under the leadership of Charles Rogier, believed that the excessive public influence of the church had to be limited. In 1850 they created a state-run secondary-school system to compete with the Catholic system. Primary schools were of little interest to the political parties because they concerned the training of the masses, who were politically irrelevant. Secondary schools, on the other hand, were populated by the children of the middle class, who became political participants after the extension of the franchise in 1848. Control of secondary education could no longer be conceded to the church.

The church, both in Rome and in Belgium, reacted quickly and vehemently, denouncing the move as an unjustifiable attack on the rightful social role of religion and a violation of the constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and education. The controversy dragged on, and a compromise was finally agreed upon in 1854 to the effect that state schools would set aside two hours a week for religious instruction. The church, in turn, surrendered any control over appointment of teachers in state schools.

Skirmishes broke out periodically over the next 20 years, growing increasingly explosive until the Liberals, then controlled by the Radicals, passed the Education Act of 1879, which excluded religion from the public primary schools. The actions of 1850 had been moderate and open to compromise: the state wished to limit the church's monopoly of education and created its own alternative system. The law of 1879, however, not only violated the law of 1842 but also portended a campaign to extirpate the church from society itself.

The extremism of the action cost the Liberals support from all sectors of the community. Many voted with their feet, taking their children out of public schools and enrolling them in Catholic schools until by 1881 about 60 percent of Belgian children were receiving a Catholic education. By 1884 the electoral consequences were clear, and the Liberal cabinet was forced to resign. They never again were able to form a government by themselves.

The Socioeconomic Cleavage: Democratization and the Socialist Party

The Belgian system had from the beginning been a regime of the upper classes. As early as the 1840s, however, a movement began to take shape for the inclusion of the increasingly powerful and restive middle class as well. The Liberals, upon coming to power in 1847, promised to enlarge the franchise. In 1848, prompted at least in part by an outbreak of middle-class and working-class violence in Paris, a landmark franchise law was passed. It lowered property qualifications to the minimum allowable under the Constitution, immediately doubling the urban electorate and adding one-third to the rural electorate. Property qualifications for municipal elections, which had no constitutionally mandated minimum, were lowered even further.

The participation of the masses of workers, however, remained an open question. Belgium was, by 1840, substantially industrialized, ranking second only to Britain in production, and had a working class to match. Already by 1848 there was a nascent labor movement, but it was not until the 1860s and 1870s—largely because of a serious economic downturn, especially after 1873—that labor began to organize under the banner of socialism and to demand improvement in working conditions, higher wages, and universal suffrage. Prohibited by law from forming labor unions, the workers' efforts tended to focus on mutual aid societies, craft associations, and producer and consumer cooperatives.

Socialism's appeal to the working class and the growing number of Socialist associations represented another secular chal-

King Leopold II (1865–1909), who ruled during the consolidation of the Belgian nation and the extension of its power into Africa
Courtesty Belgium Information and Documentation Institute

lenge to the church's hold on the allegiances of Catholics. To counter the Socialists, the Catholic Congresses of Malines (1863,1864, and 1867) advocated extending the "family" to include members not only of the middle class but also of the working class. The main political benefit of this organizing movement was the construction of an electoral machine capable of competing with the Liberal Party structure. Although Catholics did not create a formal party structure until after World War II, it is possible to speak of the establishment of a Catholic "party" as a de facto arm of the Catholic church in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

The Belgian political system, alone among continental European nations, incorporated the middle class into the political system peacefully and gradually. It had the luxury of 30 years of domestic peace and limited popular participation in which to stabilize party organizations and gain experience in the machinery of democracy.

Inclusion of the working class, not yet enfranchised, into the Catholic system was intended to outflank the labor movement and its social organizations. A federation of Catholic groups was

set up in 1868 and covered a number of associations devoted to religious, social, or educational work or, in many cases, simply served as social clubs. This combined with the Catholic Federation of the Constitutional and Conservative Associations, which had often served as electoral organizations. A federation of workers' associations, itself established in 1867, also collaborated with the liberal Catholic organizations. The First School Conflict produced a further proliferation of groups. Thus, by 1884 Catholics had not only developed an effective electoral machine but had also constructed an intricate network of social organizations encompassing the whole spectrum of society and designed to provide a "world" for its members. When the franchise expanded in 1893, these organizations became supremely important.

The Socialist labor movement organized slowly, first as a social system and later as a political movement. Both Catholics and Socialists arrived at the same place through opposite processess. The Catholic political leaders, already armed with an effective electoral machine, set out to create a social network, largely to combat the growth of Socialist organizations. The Socialist political party, on the other hand, was created by preexisting social groupings for the purpose of lending some coherence and practical power to the Socialist cause, especially for universal suffrage.

The process of founding the Socialist party was difficult because the Flemish and Walloon workers chose different ideological strains within socialism as the basis of their development. The Flemings looked to the German workers' movement, founding the Belgian Workers Party in 1877, which followed the program of the German Social Democratic Party. Walloon workers, on the other hand, tended to be anarchists, rejecting parliamentary activity and forming their own Republican Socialist Party, which organized strikes and acts of sabotage. Within a few years the anarchistic wing had proved counterproductive. Socialism in Belgium, as in the rest of Europe, turned away from revolution and advocated social democratic reformism; universal male suffrage was seen as the key to winning political power in the democratic system. The final amalgamation took place in Brussels in 1885 with the establishment of a unified Belgian Workers Party, carefully avoiding the word *socialist* in hopes of attracting Catholic workers as well.

The Socialist party, like the Catholic party (fortified in 1891 with its own union, the Democratic League), constituted a "family"—a "world" of self-sufficient social, economic, and political networks for its members, regardless of class. As a leading socialist of that time said:

> The Catholic Church takes a man from his birth to give him baptism, indoctrinates him, blesses his marriage and gives him last rites at his death. In the same way, the Belgian Labor Party [or Workers], by its multiple organizations, is interested in its members from the tenderest age, organizes play circles for the "Children of the People," constitutes the "Young Guards," mutual aid societies, unions, and cooperatives that procure life cheaply, help in case of misfortune, a pension in case of old age or illness. Like the Church, the Belgian Labor Party wants to constitute a State within the bourgeois State.

This system of competing spiritual families had many uses for the political system. The parties and their elaborate networks helped to demobilize the masses at a time when the issues of distribution of the benefits of industrialization and participation in the political system were particularly volatile all over Europe. The elite had only to look at the periodic chaos that reigned in France to recognize the advantages of this supremely moderate system. These mass organizations, therefore, were actively encouraged. Under the system known as *liberté subsidiée* (subsidized liberty), the state not only allowed social organizations to develop but also subsidized them. The state provided them with the means with which to care for their members by entrusting to them the responsibility for state social welfare programs.

As labor became increasingly organized, universal male suffrage became the principal political issue. It was supported by all progressives, both Socialist and Liberal. The Socialists were the first to demand universal suffrage and launched a campaign to force the issue in 1881. The following year Radical Liberals formed the National League for Electoral Reform, which many Socialists also joined. Through the Radical Liberals, the Socialists, still powerless by themselves, could get a hearing in the press and in parliament.

Popular agitation for the cause grew year by year, fueled by an economic crisis that left many unemployed, feeling helpless and potentially violent. Nevertheless, parliament, particularly the conservative wing of the Catholic party, refused to revise the Constitution. In 1886 a series of spontaneous strikes in Liège and Charleroi ended in a frenzy of pillaging and destruction. The riots were quelled within a few days, but the scale of the events convinced the parliament that some concessions were inevitable. The government, under the Catholic prime minister, August Beernaert, tried to conciliate labor in 1887 with the passage of Belgium's first social legislation, regulating working hours for women and children, worker's housing, insurance benefits, and

pension provisions.

Another series of strikes broke out in 1892, and a massive general strike, followed by rioting, ended the impasse. Finally, on September 7, 1893, parliament established a compulsory vote for an enlarged male electorate, increased from about 136,000 to 1.4 million. A compromise provision to allay the fears of conservatives gave plural votes (up to three per person) on the basis of education, tax, and family status. This ensured a heavy overrepresentation of the wealthy and the rural voters, both overwhelmingly Catholic party supporters. Thus, 37 percent of the electorate had 58 percent of the votes. The obvious bias inherent in the system infuriated the Socialists, who threatened further strike action. The compromise solution, sponsored by the Liberals, was the institution of proportional representation in parliament in 1899.

Equal universal suffrage remained the goal of the Socialist party, but it was only in 1913, in exchange for a promise to behave according to parliamentary norms, that they got a commitment from the other parties to consider a revision of the rules. World War I intervened, and not until 1919 did equal universal male suffrage become the law of the land.

The landscape of Belgian politics changed slightly after the electoral reforms. In the 1894 election the Catholic party, profiting from the increased weight of rural and conservative votes, retained its dominance, winning about two-thirds of the seats with about half of the votes cast. It continued to receive a formidable majority of Flemish votes. After Beernaert's resignation in 1894, seven Catholic cabinets ruled the country until 1914, having tenures that ranged from nearly eight years to only a few months. The Socialists overtook the Liberals for the second spot, getting most of their votes from the Walloon region, the most highly industrialized area. The Liberals, by the turn of the century clearly diminishing as a political force, tried to establish a working coalition with the Socialists on educational issues. On most other issues, however, they allied with the Catholics. They sponsored and won proportional representation in 1899 owing to Catholic support. The Catholics needed Liberal support on class issues and preferred the Liberals, even with their anticlericalism, to the Socialists, who were not only working class but radical as well.

The War Period

World War I

As the nineteenth century ended, a new balance of power in

Europe was in the making. Two competing alliance systems, the Triple Entente—Britain, France, and Russia—faced off with the Central Powers—Germany and Austria-Hungary—over control of Europe. Belgium, although neutral as required by the treaty of 1831, was closely tied to Britain. Many times in the past, particularly during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, only the threat of British intervention had guaranteed Belgium's neutrality against violation by either combatant. From 1904 on, however, Britain's alliance with France destroyed the deterrent effect. In the event of war between France and Germany, Britain would almost certainly side with France, regardless of whether or not Germany respected Belgian territory.

German planners were well aware of the situation, and as early as 1904 the General Staff approved the Schlieffen Plan, which detailed a plan of attack against France through Belgium. Belgium started discussions with Britain about defense, but any serious cooperation would have required Belgian entrance into the Triple Entente. The Belgian government refused to consider this option, believing that it would constitute an invitation for a German invasion. In this situation, the principle of neutrality had to be scrupulously maintained. Bereft of any external protector, however, Belgium had to strengthen its own defense forces to deter a German advance.

For years the Belgian kings—Leopold I (1831–65), Leopold II (1865–1909), and Albert (1909–34)—had tried to convince the political elite that Belgian defenses were hopelessly inadequate while the danger of invasion was quite real. Despite the palpable tension in Europe at the turn of the century, neither the political leaders, especially those of the ruling Catholic party, nor the public acknowledged the danger. For the Catholic party, moral reservations against "exposing impressionable youth to barracks life" combined with a fear of the political consequences of advocating military reforms to prevent any practical response. A reverence for the moral righteousness of neutrality was deeply ingrained in the society. Perhaps more telling, however, was the general abhorrence of war born of many generations of having to live with, or die from, the disputes of others. This feeling was particularly acute in Flanders, the scene of innumerable battles in the past.

In 1862 the Meeting Party was established to oppose the plans of Leopold I to consolidate the national defense at Antwerp. It was a small but significant Flemish movement, which started as a protest among property owners who feared a drop in property values. It rapidly escalated into a Flemish grievances party, contending that Brussels, untouched by this newfound need for de-

fense despite its position as capital and royal residence, was patently anti-Flemish and willing, if not eager, to condemn innocent Flemings to the dislocations of constructing a ring of forts and ultimately exposing them to the dangers of warfare. The Meeting Party was an important step in the evolution of Flemish consciousness and a vivid reminder of the public distaste for anything that smacked of militarism.

Leopold II had persuaded parliament to pass legislation (which he signed on his deathbed in 1909) establishing a draft based on the clear evidence of German war plans, but the measure, full of politically necessary compromises, was inadequate to make the army a credible force. A new defense bill designed to increase the size of the army to 340,000 men (up from 180,000) was passed in 1913 in a crisis atmosphere. These measures were too late; when the army was mobilized the next year, it totaled just over 200,000 and was clearly no match for the massive German invasion.

On August 4, 1914, German forces poured over the border (exactly according to the Schlieffen Plan) and quickly established control in most of Belgium. Despite the foreknowledge of enemy strategy, no defensive plans existed for Belgian forces because of an intractable disagreement between Prime Minister Charles De Broqueville and King Albert. By October only a tiny piece of Belgian territory along the IJzer River remained in Belgian hands. The king and what was left of the Belgian army remained there for the duration of the war. The Government of National Union, representing all parties, including the Socialist party in its first cabinet position, was formed in exile in Le Havre, France.

The German occupation, though strict, was relatively humane, at least in the beginning, despite reports in the contemporary jingoistic press. Life under the occupation was above all dull. No political parties or organs operated, economic life was diminished, the large factories shut down, newspapers ceased publication, and universities closed. No organized resistance emerged, and civil servants were encouraged by the Belgian government-in-exile to remain in their posts and do their duty "in accordance with the laws of war."

German policy toward Belgium was from the beginning confused. There was general agreement that Belgium should remain permanently part of the German sphere, separated from France. But the Germans vacillated as to whether or not they wanted a strong or a weak Belgium. This decision could be postponed, but an immediate decision had to be made on occupation policy. One option was to have a benign occupation, leaving a strong Belgium

after the war ready to contribute to German growth. The other option was to divide the nation internally, playing on the multitude of preexisting tensions, to produce a weak Belgium easily exploitable. In the end no final decision was made, and the occupation government employed both policy options with no sense of consistency or conviction. The first policy, favored by Governor Moritz von Bissing, the head of the occupation regime, was abandoned as the German economy increasingly required Belgian labor and materials. The second policy, dividing the nation, was implemented in fits and starts from 1917 to little practical advantage for the occupiers, but it was important for the future.

By 1916 the German economy showed the strains of war. A serious manpower shortage hampered industrial production, and an urgent call for Belgian volunteers to work in Germany produced a disappointing turnout of only a few tens of thousands. In October 1916 mass deportations were begun that ultimately affected about 120,000 Belgians. The program lasted only four months and was canceled under intense international pressure as well as domestic opposition in Germany. The occupation government feared that such actions would rouse the Belgians out of their sullen acceptance and provoke active resistance. Nevertheless, economic necessity again intervened, and in 1917 the Germans began a systematic dismantling of the Belgian economy. Apparently, the authorities intended to compensate owners for the materials, but payments were never made. Belgian losses, estimated at nearly BF7 billion by 1915, were incalculable.

The schizophrenia of German policy became clear when, simultaneous with this massive exploitation of the economy, they launched a program to split the nation and woo the Flemings. In fact, German culture, more than French, had been a focus of attention and emulation for years, especially for Flemings. Students pursued their education in Germany far more often than in France; German ideological and political currents reverberated in Belgium and in some cases, such as the Socialist party, formed the model for development. Nevertheless, the German authorities were convinced that Belgians, in particular the Walloons, were thralls of France. In 1916 they started a campaign to entice the Flemings to support German interests by satisfying some long-standing Flemish demands. In October a Flemish university was opened at Ghent, and in March 1917 Belgium was divided into two distinct administrative regions. Flemings were faced with a dilemma. By cooperating with the national enemy (at that very time ransacking the economy) the Flemings might finally achieve these and other popular goals thereby strengthen-

ing their hand in postwar Belgium regardless of the war's outcome; they also ran the risk of being labeled as traitors. It was an impossible choice, and in the end "Activism," as it was called, attempted to manipulate the Germans to accomplish Flemish goals. This gambit failed, and many participants in the university and in the political and administrative organs (in particular, the Council of Flanders) set up under German aegis suffered in postwar reprisals.

In the Belgian Army, trapped on the IJzer front, Flemish Activism blossomed in early 1917. The army was an exaggerated microcosm of the Belgian social and political system. The officer corps was almost exclusively Walloon, or at least French-speaking, and blatantly anti-Flemish; some 60 to 80 percent of the troops were Flemings, who spoke no French. There was no possibility of promotion for the Flemings and little hope of an improvement in the miserable conditions of life in the trenches. Among the troops were some Flemish intellectuals who decided to use standard university techniques of study-circles to consider the problem of morale. The high command tolerated this development but became increasingly disturbed by its growth, finally banning the circles in February 1917. The circles did not disband, however, but rapidly became politicized, addressing the broader question of the Flemings' place in society and politics.

In July 1917 the leaders of this "Front Movement" published an open letter to Albert, listing grievances and demanding reforms after the war as the price for their continued discipline. In October 1917 the demands were boosted to include full Flemish self-government. Delegates of the Front Movement crossed over into occupied territory in the spring of 1918 and established relations with the Flemish Activist groups and, unknown to the leaders of the movement, suggested that wholesale mutiny was close at hand in the trenches.

In 1918, after 52 months of occupation, Belgium slowly began to realize the extent of the damage: 46,000 dead and 50,000 seriously wounded (in a country of approximately 7.4 million people), heavy industry destroyed, an infrastructure in almost total collapse, and the country's national wealth reduced by at least 12 percent and perhaps as much as 16 to 20 percent. In addition to this material loss, Belgium, like the rest of Europe, suffered a severe shock to its ideological and moral system. The genteel life of the nineteenth century was forever lost; many of the old conflicts had been overtaken by the increasing intensity of demands from both the workers and the Flemings for political power. The cozy security of neutrality was shattered. The barbar-

Scene of destruction in Leuven from August 1914. Such scenes gave rise both to pacifist movements and to strong resistance to the invaders. Courtesy Belgium Information and Documentation Institute

ity of the war and the apparently inherent instability of the balance of power system forced Belgium to reassess its traditional foreign policy. Twenty years later this experience shaped Belgium's response to a new crisis.

The Conference of Versailles (1918–19), which produced the peace treaty, addressed Belgium's reparations and territorial claims, ultimately giving the nation BF2 billion (prewar value), barely one-third of the actual damages and about one-fifth of its initial request. Belgium also tried to use the forum to renegotiate the territorial settlements of 1839 but squandered the considerable respect gained by its war efforts and received only the eastern cantons of Eupen, Malmédy, and Saint-Vith, lost in 1815, and control of the German colonies of Ruanda and Urundi (present-day Rwanda and Burundi), which bordered the Belgian Congo (see Decolonization Crisis, this ch.).

The Interwar Period

For the next 20 years Belgium entered into a number of pacts designed to strengthen its political and economic security. It entered the French alliance system under a Franco-Belgian military agreement in 1920, was one of the first signatories to the League of Nations, and in 1925 joined the Locarno Treaties with France and Germany, which guaranteed their borders. In 1930 the Treaty of Oslo established preferential customs arrangements among the Scandinavian nations, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. Belgium and Luxembourg themselves established the Belgium-Luxembourg Economic Union in 1922.

Reconstruction of the economy was of necessity a high priority and prompted immediate action to avoid inflation and repair the economic infrastructure. The goal was to restore the economy to its prewar level, not to reform it, although some amelioration of the condition of workers was considered inevitable. The political power of bankers and industrial leaders was enhanced both because of their humanitarian efforts during the war and because their technical expertise was invaluable in dealing with the complex situation. In 1924 price levels were five times what they had been in 1914 (relatively mild inflation in comparison with the rest of Europe), the national debt had more than doubled to BF54 billion, and the currency had depreciated precipitously. The economy as a whole achieved its prewar level by 1925, but the condition of the working class, though marginally improved, was still far from satisfactory. By 1928, the end of the reconstruction period, per capita income had decreased by 9 percent, and the tax burden had risen by 70 percent compared with the 1913 level.

The situation appeared to many to be extremely volatile. It was decided that a government of national solidarity, pledged to social reform, was the only viable option. Albert convened a meeting of the leaders of the major parties at Lophem Castle, and on November 21, 1918, a new coalition of Catholics, Liberals, and Socialists was formed. The next day the king announced future radical reforms: the end of the plural vote and the establishment of universal male suffrage, equal rights for all national languages, the foundation of a Flemish university at Ghent, and the repeal of Belgium's obligatory neutrality.

Universal male suffrage was established in 1919, and elections for parliament were held in November. The results reinforced the societal division among the parties. The Catholics, strongest in Flanders, and the Socialists, dominant in Wallonia, each received a little over one-third of the total; the Liberals and splinter groups shared the remainder. Thus the pattern that was

to dominate Belgian politics for the next 20 years was set. Because no party could effectively rule alone, coalition government was inevitable, and the Liberals, though the weakest of the three major groups, controlled the crucial swing vote.

The homogeneous nature of the parties became more pronounced. Voters rarely switched their support, and party affiliation took the character of a family legacy handed down from generation to generation. The system of associated agencies (mutual aid societies, unions, social groups, etc.) also solidified, and the "worlds," or "pillars," as they were increasingly called, became more distinct and universal, within a decade becoming the most important factors in the life of the average Belgian. As an eminent historian of the period noted:

> There is extraordinarily little social intercourse between Catholics and Liberals, and practically none between Catholics and Socialists. Politics enters into almost every phase of social activity and philanthropic effort and it is the exception rather than the rule for persons holding different opinions to co-operate in any other matter. Thus, in one town there will be a Catholic, a Liberal, and a Socialist trade union, a Catholic, a Liberal and a Socialist co-operative bakery, a Catholic, a Liberal and a Socialist thrift society, each catering for similar people, but each confining its attentions to members of its own political party. The separation extends to cafés, to gymnasia, choral, and temperance, and literary societies; indeed, it cuts right through life.

Despite the centrality of politics, the system in fact contributed to a remarkable passivity of the electorate and the overwhelming power of its leaders. While workers across Europe organized and rioted, the working class in Belgium remained calm. Significant social reforms were enacted between 1919 and 1924, including a progressive income tax designed to provide state funds for social programs, such as subsidized housing construction, limited voluntary insurance for unemployment and sickness, old-age pensions, and limited voting rights for women. Following the prewar practice of *liberté subsidiée*, these programs were funneled through the pillars. The eight-hour work day and 48-hour workweek were established in 1921, as well as the right of "full and free association" of workers, making unions at last legal. The social legislation blunted the attraction of radical movements, including the Belgian Communist Party, which was founded in 1921 with about 1,000 members but which had increased to only 9,000 by 1939.

The position of the monarchy was greatly enhanced by Albert's wide popularity. The previous monarchs had experienced

often caustic relations with the political parties because of their activism, and their personalities did not endear them greatly to the populace. Albert, on the other hand, had won enormous public and elite approval for his leadership during the war. The value of the monarchy, previously questioned, especially by the Socialists, ceased to be a political issue. When Leopold III succeeded to the throne in 1934, the institution was secure.

The Great Depression hit Belgium very hard. With an economy heavily weighted toward exports, the collapse of the international economy had immediate effects; unemployment grew from 76,000 at the end of 1930 to 200,000 in 1931, to 340,000 in 1932, and to 350,000 in 1934, the worst year, when more than one-third of workers having unemployment insurance were totally or partly unemployed. The actual numbers of unemployed were probably much higher.

Parliament, unable to cope with the complexity and desperation of the situation, abandoned most of its powers, giving special authority to the government. Because the stakes were so high and the governments were no longer determined by parliamentary strength but by formal agreements among party leaders on specific issues, cabinets became particularly fragile. During the 1919–40 period 17 governments were formed, but during the 1936–40 period alone there were six, none of which survived longer than nine months. Throughout the 1930s doubts about the viability of parliamentary democracy dominated political commentary, and many politicians were attracted to authoritarianism and the idea of a stronger state. Proposals for state control over the economy, especially Hendrik de Man's *Plan du Travail* of 1933, enjoyed some popularity, especially among Socialists.

Discontent about the political system was particularly acute in the lower middle class. The economy in Belgium, as in the rest of Europe, was being transformed into a modern economy of highly concentrated, efficient, and large industrial and commercial enterprises having an ever increasing competitive advantage and formidable resources, both economic and political. At the same time, labor was extremely well organized. From 1914 to 1934, total union membership increased, from 250,000 to 875,000, and represented a major political force. By contrast, the middle class had never developed a coherent class outlook or organization, and its political disarray was clearly threatening its economic survival.

Other groups felt themselves ignored or abused by their political system as well. War veterans and retired officers felt that the political parties had squandered the national patrimony; stu-

dents were filled with romantic ideals and disillusioned by the succession of ineffectual, lifeless governments; and Flemish nationalists were more militant than ever after two decades of broken promises.

Fascist movements emerged in the 1930s to exploit these tensions. However, most analysts agree that the economic crisis was not the critical factor in their development. It was only after the worst of the depression was over, in 1936, that voters turned to the fascist parties, perhaps to prevent another crisis. The long tradition of Catholic, corporatist thought contributed to fascism's appeal among the traditionally conservative farmers and businessmen. Benito Mussolini's apparently successful fascist experiment in Italy seemed to prove that order and authority were possible even in the modern world.

Perhaps the most important single contributor to right-wing movements, however, was Flemish nationalism. The language question, first seriously broached during World War I, became an increasingly important political and social question in the interwar period. Among a number of organizations that exploited growing grass-roots support for Flemish demands, two came to be dominant.

The League of the Dutch-speaking Partisans of National Solidarity (Verdinaso) was established in 1931 by Joris Van Severen, a leader of the Front Movement and a member of parliament from the movement's successor, the Front Party. Verdinaso was a paramilitary organization having the vague and shifting goals of seizing power and establishing a "new order" based on a corporatist system and Flemish dominance. Its principal attraction apparently was the dynamic personality of Van Severen, but it gained an important following in the province of West-Vlaanderen and among the university students in Ghent and Louvain (Leuven).

The Flemish National League (VNV) was more significant than Verdinaso. It was established in 1933 by Staf de Clercq to unite the various Flemish nationalist organizations. Because of Verdinaso's growing popularity, corporatist authoritarianism became the watchword of the combined Flemish groups despite their previously emphatic support of parliamentary democracy. The VNV also echoed Verdinaso's call for a reunification of the *dietsche* people, the Flemish and the Dutch. The popularity of the party was more related to its Flemishness than to its fascism, and the party continued to participate in democratic elections.

The Flemish nationalists rapidly increased their representation in parliament, from four in 1921 to 11 in 1929; in 1932 the up-

ward trend was reversed, and they received only nine seats. But owing to the VNV's efforts and propaganda they elected 16 deputies in 1936 and 17 in 1939 out of a total of 202. The electoral appeal of the nationalists varied greatly across Flanders; it was very strong in the countryside and small towns but relatively weak in the larger cities. Flemish nationalism had clearly become a widespread grass-roots movement essentially outside the control of the major party elite and cutting across the usual social cleavages of religious and class affiliations. The nature of Flemish nationalism had changed the interwar quasi-fascist movements into a deeper mass consciousness.

The most successful fascist party was the Rexist Party, established in 1936 by Leon Degrelle, but its popularity was also attributable to factors other than its fascist goals. Degrelle, a dynamic young Catholic, started as the leader of a religious crusade and ended as the head of a party dedicated to overthrowing the political elite responsible for the "corruption" that seemed endemic in Belgian democracy. Within six months, after a barnstorming campaign throughout the country, the Rexist Party received 270,000 votes in the May 1936 elections—11.5 percent of the total. Particularly strong in Wallonia and Brussels, the movement was predominantly middle class, including lawyers and professors, shopkeepers and employees. But the strong vote was more a protest against the major parties than a vote of confidence in Degrelle and his organization. In fact, the Rexists never really proposed a coherent program, relying on well-worn ideas of corporatism. As Degrelle's dictatorial ambitions became clear, his base of support rapidly disintegrated, owing to the strong denunciations of the Roman Catholic Church and the joint efforts of the three major parties. At the next general election in 1939, the Rexists won only 4 percent of the vote.

When the German army invaded Belgium in 1940, the VNV leaders and Degrelle welcomed them. The Rexist Party became an organ of civil and military collaboration with the occupation forces; Degrelle himself wore a German uniform and fought on the Russian front as the leader of a Walloon brigade incorporated into the German army. Almost immediately the vast majority of Belgians, including many of the followers of both movements, disavowed the collaboration.

World War II

In the 1930s the international situation had looked perilous. Germany, since 1933 under the rule of Adolf Hitler, had built up a massive war machine, occupied the Rhineland in 1935, and

ominously thundered at France. By 1936 Belgium's accord with France appeared more a burden than a safeguard. In July Paul Henri Spaak, the Belgian foreign minister, abrogated the Locarno Treaties and all other mutual defense obligations. Belgium henceforth pursued a policy of "active neutrality."

On May 10, 1940, without a formal declaration of war, German troops invaded Belgium, almost immediately destroying over one-half of the Belgian air force and quickly establishing control over the border territories. On May 28 Leopold III surrendered and, against the advice of his cabinet, determined to stay in command of his army in Belgium, following the example of his father, Albert. In just 18 days about 20,000 died, most of them in the attempt to hold the line on the coast to allow the Dunkerque evacuation to proceed. Precisely what happened, however, remained subject to enormous controversy. Many accused the king of treason, capitulating without a proper fight or coordination with the British and French allies. The king's controversial behavior throughout the war became the major political issue in the immediate postwar period.

Meanwhile a government-in-exile was formed in France but resigned on August 20. A new government was reconstituted in London in October and pledged to continue the war in conjunction with the Allied forces. A territorial army was mobilized, and the Belgian Congo's formidable gold reserves were devoted to the war effort. The Belgian Congo contributed over US$28.5 million between 1940 and 1943 alone. This, together with Belgium's prewar gold reserves, allowed Belgium to pay its own way throughout the war and even make donations to the efforts of its allies, especially Britain.

The German occupation regime enforced strict economic control, seizing all food supplies and imposing harsh rationing, and they resurrected the World War I plans for the annexation and dismemberment of Belgium into Flemish and Walloon regions. By 1942 most public officials had been replaced by Rexists or VNV collaborators. The Germans hoped for widespread Flemish cooperation and by way of enticement sent back only the Flemish prisoners of war after the cessation of hostilities. These advances were, nevertheless, overwhelmingly rejected in Flanders as in the rest of the country. Massive labor deportations to German factories began in 1942. Leopold may have saved 500,000 Belgians, mostly women and children, from forced labor by direct intervention with Hitler. Jews were a particular target for deportation to concentration camps; of the original Jewish population of about 90,000 (some 15,000 were refugees), only about 20,000 survived

the war. Belgium was finally liberated in September 1944. In four years of brutal occupation, 55,000 Belgians had lost their lives, and the national wealth had fallen by 8 percent.

On September 8, 1944, the government-in-exile, headed by Hubert Pierlot, returned to Brussels. The parliament of 1939 was reinstated and purged of collaborators. Leopold III and his family, who had all been arrested by the Germans in June 1944 and removed first to Germany and then to Austria, were liberated by the United States Army on May 7, 1945.

The Postwar Period: Foreign Policy Activism

European Integration

Belgium was in the forefront of the movement toward European integration. The size of its domestic market and the importance of the manufacturing sector in its economy made exporting essential. Any mechanism that could streamline the process was actively pursued. As early as the 1920s Belgium signed a number of bilateral and multilateral treaties to facilitate trade. In 1944 Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg created the Benelux customs union, and in quick succession a series of agreements established the infrastructure for a European economic and political union. Belgium was a founding member of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1958 and in 1984 remained one of its strongest supporters (see Trade Organization and Policy, ch. 3; Multilateral Relations, ch. 4).

Belgian domestic politics historically displayed a remarkable immunity to foreign policy issues. Rarely had foreign affairs been discussed and never passionately. After the two world wars, however, Belgium abandoned its traditional neutrality in favor of a strong military and political alliance system and an extremely activist foreign policy. In March 1948 Belgium joined Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg in the Treaty of Brussels, which created a 50-year alliance against armed attack and provided for economic, social, and military cooperation. By this time, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union had degenerated into the Cold War, and a larger, more comprehensive defense system was considered necessary. In April 1949 the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), linking the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, was established. This organization continued to provide the principal coordinating device for joint defense of Western Europe throughout the postwar period and remained the major determinant of Belgian de-

Paul Henri Spaak, Belgian prime minister (1938–39 and 1947–50), strong proponent of European integration, and first president of the United Nations General Assembly
Courtesy Belgium Information and Documentation Institute

fense expenditures and plans (see Belgium and NATO, ch. 5; Appendix C).

Belgium was a founding member of the United Nations (UN); Paul Henri Spaak served as the first president of its General Assembly. While serving as Belgium's prime minister and foreign minister, Spaak also served as president of the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC), set up in 1948 to coordinate European efforts under the Marshall Plan, the recon-

struction aid program sponsored by the United States.

The economic reconstruction of Western Europe remained a high priority in the early postwar period. Belgium, despite its heavy losses, was in a better position than many other nations. Inflation, the usual postwar hazard, was avoided by Operation Gutt (named after the finance minister, Camille Gutt). It was an ingenious system of exchanging wartime franc notes for new notes and effectively destroyed wartime black market profits and restored faith in the currency. Destruction of Belgium's industrial plant was relatively limited, and the United States contributed to the reconstruction with substantial loans, totaling US$150 million between 1945 and 1947, as well as an additional US$518 million in Marshall Plan aid. By the summer of 1947 industrial production was up by 15 percent over prewar levels, and Belgium became the major producer of most of Europe's essential needs (especially iron and steel products) until the early 1950s. This export income, added to export income from the Belgian Congo, made Belgium a relatively wealthy nation and allowed it to become the major lender nation (after the United States) to other European countries.

Decolonization Crisis

Belgium was dragged, kicking and screaming, into the imperialist age by Leopold II. A vigorous and ambitious man who succeeded to the throne in 1865, he harbored visions of greatness for his small country and, in the nineteenth century, that meant colonies. By that time most of Asia and much of Africa had already been carved up by the European powers, but the African interior remained unsettled. Explorer Henry M. Stanley emerged from a three-year journey following the Congo River and returned to England to offer the land to the British government. It was uninterested, but Leopold seized the opportunity.

Deliberately emphasizing its scientific and humanitarian character in order not to antagonize the stronger European powers, Leopold II began his involvement in the Congo under the subterfuge of presiding over the International African Association (Association Internationale Africaine—AIA). From 1876 until 1880 the AIA carried on its assigned task of publicizing and encouraging exploration. By 1879, with Stanley's help, Leopold laid plans for a free state in the Congo. While Stanley founded Leopoldville, the French were also ceded certain territories in the Congo. By 1882, however, Leopold created the International Association of the Congo (Association Internationale du Congo—AIC) and persuaded the United States and Germany to accept the

association's territorial status. The Kingdom of Belgium had no official part in this process; it was begun as and remained a private commercial venture of the king.

By 1884 the Berlin Conference, which had been convened to mediate the claims of the European powers to African territory, recognized a new, neutral state of the Congo, even though the AIC was not officially represented. Throughout the conference, the fiction that Leopold's private affairs were entirely separate from Belgium s was scrupulously maintained. One year later, in May 1885, a royal decree proclaimed the establishment of the Congo Free State, which had Leopold II as its ruler. These developments were met with no great enthusiasm in Belgium. Almost no one wanted a colony, except perhaps one wing of the Catholic party, but even its support was lukewarm.

The Congo Free State was administered solely as an economic enterprise; there was no concern for the economic development of the territory or the welfare of the native peoples. Chaos gradually engulfed the area, and living conditions deteriorated alarmingly. Slavery, tribal warfare, and even cannibalism were rife in many areas. Conditions caused many nations, especially Britain, to protest, and opposition within Belgium increased. In the mid-1890s annexation of the colony by Belgium was proposed as a solution to the difficulties, economic and human, that beset the Congo Free State. The territory had become a financial burden on the king; in 1890 Leopold, in exchange for a government loan of BF25 million, gave Belgium the right to annex the Congo Free State at the end of 10 years. In 1895, in desperation, Leopold signed a treaty ceding the Congo Free State to Belgium immediately. There was a tremendous outcry against taking responsibility for a colony nobody had wanted and for which the Belgian public would have to pay. The treaty was withdrawn.

Beginning in 1901 criticism of royal policies intensified. The Congo Free State became a crusade of the British cabinet, a number of humanitarian societies, and eventually even the United States. A study commissioned by Leopold himself confirmed the abysmal conditions in the colony, and the Belgian political elite slowly began to accept the necessity of annexation.

For seven years the issue simmered and even dominated Belgian domestic politics during the 1906–08 period. In 1906 parliament forced the king to accept immediate annexation, but two more years were spent discussing the mechanisms of the takeover. Finally, in 1908 the Congo Free State became a Belgian colony. The decision to annex was helped considerably by the ob-

vious value of its rubber and ivory. The Belgian Congo had started to make a profit for Belgium in 1895 and quickly outpaced even the most optimistic predictions. Its total exports, only BF11.5 million in 1892, were worth BF47.5 million in 1900. The territory known as the Domaine de la Couronne, reserved for Leopold himself, alone made an estimated profit of BF60 million between 1896 and 1906, more than one-half of which was spent by Leopold on monumental buildings and avenues in Belgium. The cost of administering the colony increased moderately after annexation but paled in comparison with the immense wealth produced for the mother country.

The Belgian Congo was given a highly centralized administrative structure and was ruled from Brussels. Aside from its economic uses, it remained largely ignored except in crises, when its resources were of particular value. The Belgian Congo saw some action during World War I, but during World War II its rubber and uranium were important as strategic materials and as important sources of gold and foreign revenue used to pay for the war effort. Following the war, the Belgian Congo experienced a huge increase in production of strategic resources and became the leading African producer of cobalt, diamonds, tin, tungsten, and zinc materials and the second biggest producer of copper.

The Congolese became increasingly dissatisfied with Belgian rule and mobilized for independence in the 1950s. The first evidence of this was a manifesto in 1956 demanding a comprehensive program of political change leading to increased self-rule. Most of these demands were rejected. The period between December 1957 and January 1959 was a time of increasing unrest, exacerbated by economic recession and unemployment. Limited political change was granted, including the first municipal elections in 1957. A plethora of political organizations sprang up, most based on ethnic ties, but the slow pace of Belgian reforms contrasted with the rapid development of independence movements throughout Africa, including the French Congo (present-day Congo). On January 4, 1959, Patrice Lumumba, head of the National Congolese Movement (Mouvement National Congolais—MNC) for the first time advocated independence. A few days later riots broke out in Leopoldville.

The Belgian government announced a new program for accelerated political change on January 13, 1959. Although it failed to give any details, it acknowledged the right of Africans to determine their own future. Finally, at the Round Table Conference summoned to Brussels in January 1960 to determine future policies, the Congolese leaders pressured the Belgian govern-

ment to set June 30, 1960, as the date for independence. In the months that followed, the situation in the Belgian Congo became increasingly complicated and violent. Rival leaders competed for control, ethnic and regional strains became more pronounced, and the Belgian settlers worked to protect their own interests by forming strategic alliances with certain of the Congolese leaders. A mutiny of the police force on July 5 convinced the Belgian government that it had to intervene militarily to restore order and protect its citizens. From that point the crisis rapidly escalated, drawing international attention and a multinational peace force established under the aegis of the UN Security Council on July 14. The Belgian government was asked to withdraw its forces, and by September 1960 Belgium's role was effectively over.

The situation in the Belgian Congo remained volatile and unsettled for a number of years. Diplomatic relations between Belgium and the Independent Congo Republic (as it was called at independence on June 30, 1960, and Zaïre after 1971) were not restored until 1964, at which time the Belgian foreign minister, Spaak, offered technical and financial aid as well as a regularization of details left undecided in 1960. Ruanda and Urundi, the former German colonies gained after World War I, were also granted independence on July 1, 1962 becoming Rwanda and Burundi, respectively.

Postwar Domestic Politics

After four years of occupation, the first priorities were to restore political stability by re-creating the preexisting political structures and, as after World War I, to restore social stability by enacting social legislation to reform labor's position in the economy. The Social Christian Party (CVP/PSC), founded in 1945, resurrected the Catholic Bloc, which had dominated the political scene for many years and represented the first attempt at formal organization of this electoral base. The practice of affiliated membership, that is, automatic party membership along with membership in an associated Catholic-run union or social organization, was replaced by individual membership. In a related move, the party announced its "deconfessionalization"—it was no longer limited to avowed Catholics and welcomed all who shared its conservative political orientation. The result of these changes was a unified, coherent, and disciplined party.

The Belgian Workers Party, disbanded in 1940, was reconstituted in 1945 as the Belgian Socialist Party (BSP/PSB). It also

became a mass party by ending affiliated membership. It remained strongly anticlerical. The Liberal Party retained its prewar status until 1961 when it changed its name, renounced anticlericalism as a basic tenet, and emphasized its conservative, middle-class nature. Renamed the Party of Liberty and Progress (PVV/PLP—known as the Liberals), it retained the Liberal Party's traditional organizational structure, which relied on local rather than national organization.

The immediate postwar period (1945–47) was dominated by a Socialist-Liberal coalition, followed by a Social Christian-Socialist coalition from 1947 to 1949. The Social Christians, as a result of the effects of the so-called Royal Question, won the first electoral sweep since the introduction of universal suffrage and ruled alone from 1950 to 1954 (see The Royal Question, this ch.). The Socialist-Liberal coalition was revived during the 1954–58 period, based on the perennial question of religion and the schools.

Almost immediately after the war, the political parties, particularly the Socialist Party under the leadership of Prime Minister Achille Van Acker, sponsored social legislation commonly known as the Social Pact. The "welfare state"—the system of state guarantees of a minimum standard of living regardless of accident, illness, or old age—assured labor of some share in the fruits of the economy, while promising labor peace to business. In addition, the legislation mandated a partnership ("concertation") among labor, business, and the state. The state was to manage the overall coordination of economic development. These reforms were very much in keeping with developments throughout Europe (see Education; Health and Social Security, ch. 2).

The Royal Question

At the same time, the issue of Leopold III's wartime behavior simmered and threatened to split the nation. The Royal Question disrupted political life from 1944 to 1950. The main complaints against Leopold were the general suspicion, warranted or not, that he had prematurely surrendered to the Germans in 1940, thereby jeopardizing British and French troops, and had somehow cooperated with the occupation authorities. Leopold had decided to remain in Belgium with his army, but he appeared to enjoy unusual benefits for a prisoner of war, including a wedding in 1941 (to a commoner, which provoked some unhappiness) and a honeymoon in Nazi-occupied Austria. He met personally with Hitler on occasion, apparently for humanitarian purposes. There was little if any concrete evidence of miscon-

duct, but during the war clandestine newspapers in Wallonia, especially those sponsored by the Socialist and Liberal parties, were full of virulent attacks against him.

Leopold was perhaps a victim of his abrasive personality. In the 1930s he had aroused anger among the political elite by being very active in foreign policy and publicly chastising politicians for succumbing to their partisan interests and failing to appreciate the seriousness of the international situation. The problem could have brought about a constitutional crisis over the monarchy itself, but the party leaders successfully limited the discussion to Leopold's personal qualifications for the office.

At the request of the government, Leopold remained in exile in Geneva while the question was debated. His brother, Prince Albert, was named regent. Although the issue itself had little to do with the language cleavage, public opinion rapidly divided along linguistic lines; the Flemings overwhelmingly supported the king, and the Walloons opposed his return. On March 12, 1950, a referendum was held to decide whether Leopold would be asked to return. Nationally, the king was vindicated with a vote of 57.7 percent in favor. However, the regional breakdown was significant. Seventy-two percent of Flemings voted in favor, but 58 percent of Walloons and 52 percent of the residents of Brussels rejected the king. The referendum, far from settling the issue, had merely underscored its divisiveness. The king, despite the deep split, intended to resume his post. He reconsidered when the announcement of his imminent return provoked mass demonstrations, strikes (involving as many as 500,000 persons), and violence in Wallonia. Bowing to the situation, in August 1950 Leopold appointed his son, Baudouin (Dutch, Boudeweijn), to rule temporarily in his stead and finally abdicated on July 16, 1951.

The Second School Conflict, 1950–58

The Royal Question at last settled, education again became a major political issue. Although the 1884 compromise had adequately served educational needs, the postwar baby boom necessitated significant expansion of the school system, once again leaving open the question of state funding. The Catholic-supported Social Christian government announced a new plan in 1952, which would have given the "free" schools (almost exclusively Catholic) substantial subsidies having few restrictions. Supporters of the state schools, Socialists and Liberals, protested that the level and the method of subsidization gave Catholic schools an unfair and overwhelming advantage over the public

school system. The elections of 1954 brought a Socialist-Liberal coalition back to power, and its first act was to overturn the previous educational policy, replacing it with a system that was decidedly favorable to the state school system.

The Catholics counterattacked with two national protest demonstrations in 1955, the first attracting about 100,000 people, the second 250,000 people. In addition, a petition demanding redress, signed by over 2.2 million people, was presented to the king. The national elections of 1958 returned the Social Christians to power, this time in coalition with the Liberals. Finally, in an effort to settle the issue, the three parties decided to construct a new compromise, resulting in the School Pact of 1958. Although a clear victory for the Catholic forces, whose position had been vastly strengthened by their ability to mobilize mass support in 1955 and again in the election of 1958, the pact satisfied most Socialist demands by creating a free-market system in education. Rather than compete directly for state support, the rival systems would now compete for consumer (parental) patronage; the level of state aid was indexed to enrollment (see Historical Background, ch. 2).

The school issue regained salience in the 1950s for the Socialists, who were dissatisfied with their level of national support, particularly in Flanders. They reasoned that the working class, which ought naturally to be drawn to the Socialist Party, had not developed a sufficiently sophisticated awareness of their socioeconomic position because of the primacy of religion in their lives. The Roman Catholic school system was the principal method by which workers were drawn into the Catholic pillar. Therefore, if the Socialist Party were ever to reach its audience, it would have to attack church activism at its base—in the schools. Unfortunately for the party, the CVP flexed its political muscle and unquestionably demonstrated its ability to summon mass support when it needed it.

Although unresolved, the religious cleavage once again was managed, and it receded into the background of politics. Three years later, the Liberal Party abandoned anticlericalism, leaving the Socialists alone to fight the battle in the future. Religion in education resurfaced in the 1970–73 period when the 1958 pact was up for renewal but was mediated with little public fanfare. The pact system—the method of crisis management through accommodation and compromise—once again proved its worth.

King Leopold III (1934–51), who was forced to abdicate because of his alleged cooperation with the German invaders during World War II
Courtesy Belgium Information and Documentation Institute