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'Are We Ready?': Belgium and the Entente's Military Planning for a War against Germany, 1906-1914

Abstract

While historians have consistently focused on the development of German, French, and British planning in the years preceding the Great War, few have truly acknowledged neutral Belgium's role in defining the strategic paradigm of 1914. Belgium held the strategic key to the opening salvos of a future Franco-German war, and each of its Guarantors were determined to obtain the initiative. While German planners were prepared to seize it by force, the *Entente* (particularly Britain), remained wary of its obligations. Instead, Britain sought to determine Belgian intentions and capabilities through secret and unbinding staff conversations in 1906 and 1912. The former proved useful in establishing a framework for co-operation but ultimately came to nothing. By the time they were resumed in 1912, Anglo-Belgian diplomatic relations had soured, while Belgium's military reforms and its emergence as a colonial power gave it a renewed sense of confidence. Belgian officials were determined to retain the kingdom's agency in the formulation of its defence policy and resented *Entente* suggestions of pre-emptive action. Neutrality was subordinated to independence, which itself could not be guaranteed were Belgium to conclude even the loosest of military accords. Consequently, *Entente* plans were forced surrender the strategic initiative to the Germans.

Key Words

First World War

Strategy

Belgium

Entente Cordiale

Neutrality

I

When the Belgian army took up its positions facing its borders in August 1914, it did so in strict accordance with the laws governing its neutral status. Unsure of who the first transgressor would be, the mobilisation of the small field force, comprising approximately 117,000 regular and 73,000 auxiliaries, was a clear sign that the kingdom was prepared to buttress neutrality with a show of arms.¹ This had not always been the case. Foreign observers had routinely questioned Belgium's capacity and willingness to do so. The fact that only 14,000 of its troops could truly be termed 'regulars', with the majority returning from long periods of furlough, might suggest they had a point.² Along with other deficiencies in the form of equipment, organisation and training, Belgium's one cavalry and six infantry divisions were a reflection of a long-term military policy gone wrong. For three decades, the ruling Catholic Party had sought to minimise military expenditure to appease its electoral support in rural Flanders, preferring to place undue confidence in the international laws guaranteeing independence. Social issues concerning workers' rights, the suffrage movement and simmering linguistic tensions dominated the political scene from the 1880s, relegating military reform to the peripheries of public discourse.³ Add to that diplomatic complications and a general uncertainty in Belgian operational planning in the years preceding the First World War, few truly knew what to expect of this woefully unprepared army once German boots headed towards Liège on 4 August 1914.

The urgency of the matter had not been lost on the army itself. Senior officers had campaigned for the introduction of universal conscription along the Prussian model since the mid-1860s, arguing that neutrality, as guaranteed by the Great Powers in 1839, meant little without an army capable of defending it. Geographically situated between France and Germany, the balance of power in Europe depended on a strong Belgium to dissuade either of its neighbours from using it as a military thoroughfare that might plunge the entire continent into war. But when, in 1911, Lieutenant-General Georges Eugène Victor Ducarne, former Chief of the Belgian General Staff from 1905-10, published a series of articles in *Le Soir* entitled 'Are We Ready?', it became painfully evident that no such deterrent existed.⁴ The evolving recruitment laws, which had passed from the ballot to a voluntary system (1902), and then onto a one-son per family form of tempered conscription (1909), still left the army proportionately weaker than its likely enemies.⁵ Only in the post-Agadir furore did significant changes to the military establishment appear likely.⁶ Meanwhile, its defensive system and strategic thinking, which had last received significant attention with the construction of the Meuse fortresses (1887-91), was beginning to look antiquated. The redevelopment of the national redoubt at Antwerp from 1906, and the eventual introduction of universal conscription in May 1913, afforded some hope that Belgium might offer more than token resistance in the event of an invasion, but these measures would take a

full decade to mature. In short, the army was not adequately prepared for the role a future war might ask it to play.

Amidst the tumult of the two Moroccan Crises in 1905 and 1911, when Europe looked certain to go to war, many eyes turned to Belgium. With a dense railway network and easy access between unfortified portions of the Franco-German border, it provided a clear strategic advantage to whichever belligerent reached an understanding with its government or deigned to violate it first. Thus, concerted efforts were made by all sides to determine Belgian intentions. The former was inconceivable, but questions abounded both within its borders, and beyond, as to whether this ramshackle army could, or would, realistically be committed to its defence.⁷ State visits were speculated at in the press, diplomatic channels surged into operation, and military attachés cast a watchful eye. General Staffs drew up operational plans in anticipation of a multitude of eventualities, which might require them to commit armies across the neutralised zone. The Schlieffen Plan, Plan XVII, and Britain's 'continental commitment' are well too documented to be detailed here, but their existence is testament to the centrality of the 'Belgian problem'.⁸ Yet, barring a few exceptions, the historiography of pre-war planning has tended to marginalise Belgium's own involvement and influence in defining the strategic parameters of August 1914.⁹

From a Belgian perspective, committing forces in defence of its territorial integrity was never in doubt. The manner and extent of such action, however, evolved over time to reflect Belgium's sense of arrival on the European stage. Thus, when secret and unbinding conversations were initiated between the British and Belgian General Staffs in 1906, the prospect of military co-operation in the event of a German invasion appeared to offer both parties a cogent response to this hypothetical situation. After all, it was fairly common knowledge that German planners intended to violate Belgian neutrality in a future war and that militarily there would be little opposition.¹⁰ Yet, by the resumption of conversations between the two General Staffs in 1912, the diplomatic and military landscape had altered significantly. Belgium's annexation of the Congo Free State in 1908 had led to a cooling in relations with the *Entente*, but had equally imbued its officials with a confidence that outstripped the military reforms being undertaken. Suspicion of *Entente* machinations had grown and were met with a new and reinvigorated interpretation of Belgium's duties and rights as a neutral. It resented the implication that *Entente* forces might be forced into Belgium pre-emptively to meet a German invasion. Belgium was determined to retain its agency and freedom of action. Neutrality was but a means of guaranteeing independence and, as such, the army was not to be sacrificed for the sake of an ideal, nor the country to the consequences of a military accord – however unbinding. What this meant in reality was unknown, but *Entente* pressure to establish whether its plans could rely on a stable and amenable Belgium only hardened Belgian resolve to withhold co-operation. That the 1906

talks had provided traction for the development of a continental commitment within certain quarters of British strategic planning was not Belgium's concern.¹¹ Upholding neutrality and safeguarding its independence was. As a result, the strategic paradigm shifted. Anglo-French plans could not be harmonised prior to the outbreak of hostilities, which handed the German army the strategic initiative. Much subsequently depended on the moribund Belgian army.

II

Despite suggestions both during and after the war that Belgium had contravened the terms of its neutrality through its military 'convention' with Britain, there is no evidence that a binding agreement was ever made. Documents produced by German officers, after raiding the Belgian Foreign Ministry's archives in 1914, raised the profile of the conversations, but few bought into the accompanying narrative justifying the invasion.¹² The swift riposte by Napoléon Eugène, Baron Beyens, the Belgian ambassador to Berlin from 1910-12, helped to shape neutral opinion. He wrote; '[s]uch are the grievances, sifted and re-sifted a hundred times over, which the German Government has flaunted, in order to vindicate itself, and to make the civilized world believe that Belgium, by her secret agreements with England, failed in her obligations as a neutral state.'¹³ Indeed, the implication that mobilisation, concentration and transport timetables for a BEF deployment to Belgium corresponded to an alliance, entirely misrepresented the effect of these documents on pre-war planning. As a number of Belgian historians were at pains to point out in the interwar years, no binding commitment was made by either side.¹⁴ It was, in the words of Lieutenant-Colonel Nathaniel Walter Barnardiston, the British military attaché charged with conducting the 1906 talks, nothing 'beyond a mutual exchange of views on the subjects under discussion and on the procedure to be followed in the event of a British intervention in support of the maintenance of Belgian neutrality.'¹⁵

Belgium's participation in such military conversations ought not to be considered extraordinary. The laws governing its neutrality, although vague, did not prohibit the exchange of information. In fact, it was a frequent occurrence throughout the nineteenth century. As Daniel H. Thomas has argued, Belgium's Guarantors (that is to say Britain, France, Prussia, Austria-Hungary and Russia), who bore a collective and individual responsibility for guaranteeing independence, tended to exert a paternalistic right of inquiry into Belgium's defensive capabilities.¹⁶ Therefore, it was not uncommon to find British officers visiting the military camp at Beverloo or inspecting the fortifications of Antwerp.¹⁷ After all, any changes to Belgian military capabilities might impact a Guarantor's response to a crisis; including the likelihood of British aid arriving via the commercial centre.¹⁸ Military co-operation, therefore, was an essential tenet to survival.

This was exemplified at the time of the Franco-Prussian War, during which confidence in Belgium's established strategy and military capabilities was shaken. Not only had the army's shambolic mobilisation revealed serious shortcomings in its recruiting system, but the rifled artillery used to bombard Paris appeared to render Antwerp's recently completed fortifications obsolete.¹⁹ More to the point, the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine by the German Empire had altered European geopolitics to such an extent that the likelihood of a direct conquest of Belgium was supplanted by the prospect of a transitory invasion along the Meuse basin. Although exponents of a lightly armed neutrality pointed to the respect afforded the Treaty of London in 1870-71, France's decision not to fortify its border with Belgium was, as David Stevenson noted, 'striking as to raise the possibility that it was deliberate'.²⁰ In a future invasion, a Belgian army concentrated around Antwerp might be completely ignored. In order for Belgium to make its neutrality felt, two things were necessary. Firstly, the Meuse fortresses of Liège and Namur required modernising, and secondly, universal conscription would have to be implemented to provide a suitably-sized field army capable of acting as a deterrent. However, Belgian governments, be they Liberal or Catholic, were not inclined to increase the personal and financial military burden for fear of precipitating an electoral backlash. Consequently, the decision to update the Meuse fortifications was not taken until 1887, albeit at the expense of universal conscription.²¹ Thus, despite the completion of the forts in 1891, the army remained inadequate for the task at hand.

Because Belgium did not appear militarily capable, the Great Powers took for granted its dependency on them to guarantee continued independence. While universal conscription was finally adopted in France through the three-year service law of 1889, Belgium remained hamstrung by the ballot system, which neither provided it with the numbers nor the quality of recruit to actively compete with the mass-armies likely to traverse its borders.²² The realists, however, would not be heard. Consequently, Antwerp remained central to the army's strategic plans, with the new fortifications on the Meuse to be used primarily as pivots for the field army's preliminary operations.²³ The concentration of forces on the central plain continued to dominate thinking, despite the wisdom of the old Jominian maxim of 'whoever is master of the Meuse is the master of Belgium'.²⁴ The central triangle between Liège, Namur and Antwerp was to form the army's mobilisation, concentration and operational boundary. Once the first two elements were complete, it was envisaged that units engaged on the Meuse would fall back in the face of overwhelming force to join the rest of the army, the Government and the Monarchy in a retreat towards Antwerp. Behind the walls of the national redoubt, Belgium could await relief from its Guarantors.

III

The most likely source of aid in the event of a Franco-German war remained Britain. Although its attitude towards Belgian neutrality was questioned in 1870, the abandonment of isolationism allowed for a future continental commitment to be contemplated.²⁵ Britain's 1902 alliance with Japan and its 1904 *Entente* with France relieved immediate pressure on Imperial matters, allowing for a greater concentration on issues closer to home. However, a degree of naivety in British diplomacy drew the country closer into the 'European vortex' than was strictly desirable.²⁶ More specifically, the creation of the Imperial General Staff (IGS) in 1904 paved the way for an Expeditionary Force to be deployed in a future continental war. As early as 1905, a strategic war game was played in which this very scenario was assessed.²⁷ This signalled the first intentions to develop a 'Belgian Option', in which a British force could foreseeably land and operate out of Oostende or Antwerp. Complications regarding Dutch control of the Scheldt meant that French ports were also considered for debarkation.²⁸ Despite reservations regarding the ability of the Belgian army to hold the Meuse forts long enough for a British intervention to reach the decisive point, operations in Belgium remained desirable. Indeed, the Director of Military Operations (DMO), Major-General Sir James Grierson, even told the French military attaché in London, Major Victor Huguet, that this was Britain's preferred scheme.²⁹ These and other proposals were placed before the CID for consideration.

Established in 1902 in the wake of the Second Boer War, the committee, under the stewardship of the Prime Minister, was tasked with devising Britain's future strategic policy. As a forum for discussion, it provided the new IGS with a platform to present coherent plans for a continental commitment. Although opinions varied within the IGS to a greater degree than is sometimes realised, the decline of the 'blue water' school of thought, added validity to its proposals.³⁰ Whereas the army was nominally prepared to entertain the idea of joint-planning, the Royal Navy, under the single-minded direction of the First Sea Lord, Sir John Fisher, appeared less forthcoming.³¹ Naval planners were interested in developing amphibious plans beyond the confines of the CID, but the Army's ever-strengthening grip over its decision-making scuppered any hopes of genuine co-operation. This created a split in strategic thought. A situation arose whereby the CID made decisions on specific issues in the 1904-6 period without ever assuming responsibility for joint planning. It failed to determine any long-term policy objectives, rather bowing to the increasing influence of the IGS and its desire to pursue a strategic ideal, which not only departed significantly from traditional British thinking but also entirely eclipsed the scope of the committee.³² As David Morgan-Owen has argued, 'the government had unwittingly shifted the balance of strategic decision making away from the maritime and towards the military.'³³

Amidst this atmosphere of uncertainty and internal politicking, Barnardiston was authorised by Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, and Richard Burdon Haldane, Secretary of State for War, to

make preliminary contact with the Belgian General Staff.³⁴ On 18 January 1906, he met with Ducarne in Brussels to discuss the manner and timing of a hypothetical British intervention in the event of a war with Germany. These first approaches were as much an opportunity to glean the respective strengths and attitudes of the British and Belgian forces as they were to establish a plan of action. Nevertheless, it was evident from the outset that both parties' strategic vision emanated from similar principles. Swift intervention on the Meuse, independence of command, as well as the secrecy and unbinding nature of the talks, were paramount. The latter point was particularly important, given the interpretive quagmire of Belgium's neutrality on the one hand, and the British desire to avoid an irreversible commitment to the Continent on the other.³⁵ This settled, Ducarne obtained permission from the Minister of War, General Alexandre Cousebandt d'Alkemade, to pursue conversations within the bounds of respectability.

Although very broad, preliminary plans to land the BEF at French ports, with a view to transporting them by rail to Antwerp, were established as a working premise. This would allow the British to link up with the Belgians in safety and harass the right flank of a possible German sweep towards France. However, the exact time and place of a British intervention was dependent upon the number of men, horses and material that could be put into the field. Although a BEF was likely to be between four and six divisions and one cavalry division, circumstances at home upon the outbreak of hostilities was likely to govern the final decision.³⁶ Yet, Haldane's restructuring of the army was still on the horizon, creating a disconnect between capabilities and policy. As David French has noted, nothing was done financially to remedy the obvious limitations in the size of the BEF, despite gross overestimations of the role it could realistically be expected to play.³⁷ Lacking a unified strategy and clearly defined objectives, the extent of the BEF's deployment to the Continent remained elusive. The question facing the IGS and the Cabinet was whether an independent role in Belgium was a viable option, or whether its limitations precluded it from anything more adventurous than operating under French command as an extension of their left flank. From a Belgian perspective, direct aid appeared probable. The manner and timing of Barnardiston's approach suggested that the IGS wished to alert Belgium of the position it 'held in the campaign plans, which [were] under consideration'.³⁸

Further meetings were arranged on 29 January and 14 February to discuss the possibility of joint operations. These envisaged two hypothetical German invasions; one towards Antwerp, and one in the direction of the French Ardennes. The former envisioned a minimum German force of five army corps, or 200,000 men, attacking towards Antwerp by the seventh day of mobilisation. In this scenario, the 100,000 strong Belgian army, whose mobilisation would have been completed by the fourth day, would take up a position either: on a line from Neerpelt to Maastricht along the Campine canal, or preferably from Turnhout to Diest, which benefitted from excellent defensive terrain. This line could

be secured on the second day by the cavalry division, four horse artillery batteries and four cyclist companies. This being done, the BEF could be transported to Leuven and Aarschot in support of the Belgian right flank in relative safety, as contact with the Germans was not expected to occur before the tenth day.³⁹

The second option, which might see a German attack along the north bank of the Meuse to avoid French troops stationed between Mézières and Sedan, placed a much greater emphasis on speed. Crossing the frontier between Eupen and Gouvy on, or after, the eighth day, it was estimated that German forces could reach Liège and Namur two days later. To be of any value, the British would need to be in position around Namur and Dinant by this time, even were it only in the form of two divisions and a cavalry brigade. Based on the approximate numbers provided by Barnardiston, Ducarne believed that he could transport the British to their positions in four to five days from the time of debarkation, meaning that the BEF's arrival in France ought to be no later than the sixth day of mobilisation. When more detailed figures were passed on by Grierson in late February, Ducarne was able to produce meticulous timetables for the BEF's transferral to Belgium from Calais, Boulogne and Cherbourg.⁴⁰ Conversations continued throughout March in which further details were refined. Ducarne's willingness to engage in the minutiae betrayed concerns over the ability of his army. Despite realising that nothing discussed was binding, his letter to the Belgian Minister of War reflected the perceived benefits of British aid should it be required. 'The most desirable results, the most favourable, can only be obtained through convergent and simultaneous action by allied forces', he wrote. 'By contrast, it would be a grave error if this accord does not materialise. Colonel Barnardiston assured me that all would be done to this end.'⁴¹

The cordiality with which the conversations were pursued by both sides, equally lends weight to the idea that Britain's preferred deployment to the Continent, should it ever transpire, was to Belgium. John Tyler proposed that the 'Belgian Option' was Britain's only plan; and even this made no reference to an alignment with the French.⁴² Notwithstanding, conversations with the French General Staff were also underway, though the extent to which joint-planning went beyond the briefest suggestion of a BEF linking-up with the French left flank in no way matched Anglo-Belgian planning in 1906.⁴³ Despite Huguet's decision in late 1905 to confide his government's anxieties over Britain's attitude in a future Franco-German war to Lieutenant-Colonel Charles à Court Repington, *The Times'* military correspondent, close co-operation appeared beset with obstacles.⁴⁴ Chief among these were concerns that a British force would be subjugated to French command the moment it landed and used inappropriately as a result.⁴⁵ This sat uneasily with the IGS, whose own 'W[ith] F[rance]' scheme was later drafted without the knowledge and input of the French military authorities.⁴⁶

Irrespectively, the Anglo-Belgian conversations of 1906 did not significantly alter the individual plans being devised by European General Staffs at this stage. Germany, France and Britain continued to develop their own schemes – albeit with Belgium in mind. It had become clearer that Belgium was prepared to uphold its neutrality, despite its lack of suitable means. Britain’s determination to secure an independent role in a future continental war clearly pushed it towards closer co-operation with the Belgians than the French in early 1906. However, the ensuing *détente* after the Algeciras Conference shifted the focus of joint-planning. Barnardiston left his post as military attaché to Brussels in May, which severed official communication. While Britain took stock of the European situation, the Belgian General Staff was left confused by the sudden withdrawal. No talks had been held with either the French or Germans in this regard, which rather left the kingdom as isolated in its neutrality as it had been the previous year. Despite Ducarne’s encounter with Grierson at the French army’s manoeuvres in September 1906, during which the latter indicated that progress in Britain’s military organisation would allow for as many as 150,000 troops to be sent to Belgium, it remained unclear as to whether the desire to do so remained.⁴⁷

IV

The period 1906-12 was truly one of *détente* in Anglo-Belgian relations. Diplomatic shots fired over the Congo Free State did little to promote a feeling of goodwill after the disappointment of 1906. Tensions between the two countries had run high since 1895, but Edmund Morel’s revelations of abuses and commercial exploitation in 1900 brought matters to a head. It ‘undermined the philanthropic narrative that King Leopold and his supports had constructed’, revealing the Congo venture to be no more than a financial boon and a means to redirect internal partisan divisions towards territorial and economic expansion abroad.⁴⁸ After a public campaign, which evoked the memory of nineteenth century anti-slavery, the House of Commons was forced to take note and lend its support to the growing movement of denunciators in May 1903.⁴⁹ The Government’s position was clarified by Grey in 1906, who called for Belgian annexation as a precursor to reform. This received the support of the United States, whose sensibilities had been roused by the internalisation of the issue, and who, in January 1908, called for a joint *démarche*.⁵⁰ Despite the torrent of international pressure, the mantle of a colonial power sat uneasily with a Belgian public, fearful of increased taxation.⁵¹ Notwithstanding, the decision was taken out of its hands when annexation was confirmed later that year. Although it was a step in the right direction from an international perspective, King Leopold II harboured particular disdain towards the foreign governments that had forced his hand in the matter.⁵² It was the first of many incidents that strained relations between himself and the British, which ultimately negatively impacted renewed attempts at Anglo-Belgian military co-operation.

The situation worsened when, having taken a leaf out of Britain's book concerning the Transvaal in 1900, King Leopold II decided that Belgium was not obliged to officially inform the other Powers of the annexation. This ran contrary to British opinion, which believed that the Berlin Act compelled Belgium to do so.⁵³ As a result, neither Britain, nor the United States, consented to recognising the annexation until evidence of sustainable reforms was provided by the new regime. For Grey, this was the limit of the pressure Britain was prepared to exert on Belgium. There was a real fear that the Congo, due to its strategic position between German and French possessions, might fall under the wrong sphere of influence were Brussels pushed too far on the matter.⁵⁴ Yet, reformers continued to campaign for more. Sir Charles Dilke, speaking to the House of Commons, for example, questioned why the government was spending such huge sums of money on military reorganisation when no war was imminent, rather than using it to support British diplomacy in the Congo question.⁵⁵ Morel, too, accused Grey of sacrificing the Congo to the demands of the *Entente* and the secret military conversations.⁵⁶ This was only partly true, for the army was in need of reform following the organisational problems laid bare by the Second Boer War.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the development of Anglo-French preparations for the commitment of an Expeditionary Force to the Continent was predicated on maintaining cordial relations with Brussels, which now appeared more responsive towards Berlin.

The once fraught relationship between Belgium and Germany was on the mend. Not only had Kaiser Wilhelm II been among the first to congratulate Belgium on its annexation of the Congo, but the timely death of King Leopold II in December 1909, removed any lasting animosity between the two royal families. This dated back to a meeting in 1904 at which the Kaiser had put out feelers to the King of the Belgians concerning tacit support in a future war in return for a 'powerful kingdom' incorporating French Flanders as well as the Duchy of Bourgogne.⁵⁸ The accession of King Albert I, a suspected Germanophile through his upbringing and education, alerted the *Entente* to the potential dangers of an unwarranted renewal of friendship. Admiration for the Prussian military system among Belgian officers had been noted by French military attachés for years, but the replacement of Ducarne with the German-sympathising General Harry Jungbluth (King Albert I's personal tutor and later Head of the Royal Household) was indicative of a much wider shift in attitude. According to the British military attaché, Lieutenant-Colonel Tom Bridges, this went as high up as the Minister of War, General Joseph Hellebaut.⁵⁹

King Albert I's visit to Potsdam at the end of May 1910 was a mark of renewed cordiality between Belgium and Germany. Every effort was made to allow the Belgian press access to the pre-arranged activities of the royal couple, which included, among other things, military reviews and gala dinners. King Albert I, who was an honorary colonel of the 16th Dragoons, demonstrated his goodwill by wearing his German uniform for the occasion, which was 'clearly more martial than that of a Belgian

general'.⁶⁰ This, he repeated in October when welcoming the Kaiser to Brussels, much to the consternation of the assembled crowd.⁶¹ Although Kaiser Wilhelm II was incapacitated for the majority of the Belgian royal visit, the Kronprinz delivered a speech in his father's name, which stressed the historic links between the two families and nations. In particular, the overcoming of difficult negotiations regarding the border disputes between the Congo and German East Africa were cited as proof of a mutual desire to find common ground upon which to develop this relationship.⁶²

No clearer evidence of this was given than at the 1910 Brussels Exhibition in which German industry and innovation stood next to, and in association with, Belgium's. Daniel Laqua has shown how World Fairs were key events in the mechanics of internationalism, which broadcast Belgium as a meeting place to celebrate global enterprise, as well as to promote unity and peace.⁶³ The visibility of such co-operation did not go unnoticed. Burgeoning economic ties, which had attracted some 40,000 Germans to Antwerp, were viewed in some quarters as 'pacific penetration' or, worse still, as a 'pre-conquest'.⁶⁴ Clearly, the influence of Gurson (later Krupp) in the redevelopment of the Meuse and Antwerp fortifications only added to French fears.⁶⁵ Although contracts were also given to the French arms manufacturer Saint-Chamond, the relationship lacked the warmth of reciprocity enjoyed between Belgian and German exchanges. This was likely the result of the general suspicion with which the Catholic Government and populace viewed the anti-clericalism of France's Republican lurch to the Left.⁶⁶

From a British perspective, the Belgo-German *rapprochement* over the Congo was a potentially seismic paradigm shift in terms of military planning. Were Brussels to sanction the passage of German troops through its south-eastern corner, the strategic disadvantages this posed to the *Entente* would be irretrievable. Even token resistance, which might allow Belgium to save face on the international stage without compromising its position vis-à-vis its 'aggressor', would produce much the same outcome – albeit retaining the pretence of neutrality and safeguarding independence.⁶⁷ Indeed, it was often mooted in British circles that Belgium would now simply avoid committing itself to either side in a war until it could make certain of joining the victors.⁶⁸ The appearance of a 1911 pamphlet by Lieutenant-General Léon de Witte, under the pseudonym O. Dax, suggesting that Belgium owed its first obligation to itself rather than the laws governing its neutrality, heightened suspicions.⁶⁹ Although it was swiftly withdrawn from circulation, the effect of such a publication reinforced *Entente* views that a once-friendly Belgium was at risk of becoming a strategic liability.⁷⁰

Anglo-French planning had developed substantially in the years 1906-08 to the point where the 'WF Scheme' seemed the most likely course of action.⁷¹ The IGS, who had been encouraged to pursue strategic considerations in conjunction with the French, argued in 1909 that:

'[A] military entente between Great Britain and France can only be of value so long as it rests upon an understanding that, in the event of a war in which both are involved alike on land and sea, the whole of the available naval and military strength of the two countries will be brought to bear at the decisive point. [The Expeditionary Force] could be more effectively used as a reinforcement to the French left than in co-operation with what would probably be a broken or dispirited Belgian army.'⁷²

Similar conclusions were drawn from a 1910 IGS war game exercise, demonstrating a definitive and practical shift in Britain's continental policy to accommodate France rather than Belgium.⁷³ This was largely a result of Sir Henry Wilson's Francophile nature, which drew Britain closer into the *Entente*. Nevertheless, certain quarters of the IGS continued to champion the inherent benefits of landing in Belgium, were information concerning its preparedness and attitude obtainable. After all, the importance of denying Belgium to Germany remained paramount but would require swift and decisive action to avoid committing the BEF to the support of an already beaten and demoralised force.⁷⁴ A decision as to whether this, or a full commitment to France, ought to be Britain's strategic course of action could, however, be decided when the situation arose. A 1907 report had revealed that the timetables drawn up by Ducarne in 1906 could equally serve as the BEF's transport to Belgium or to its positions in France.⁷⁵ This was reflected in Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith's desire, in October 1911, to see 'the Belgian plan' worked out exactly as 'the French plan' had been in 1909, even if political considerations meant that military co-operation appeared unlikely.⁷⁶

In France, too, the Dax pamphlet caused planners to take more serious note of Belgium than had previously been thought necessary. General Joseph Joffre recorded in his memoirs how it engendered a renewed desire to find out more about its neighbour's military preparedness; particularly the Meuse fortifications and their potential to delay a German advance.⁷⁷ Wilson had managed to define French conceptions of a German sweep through Belgium by 1911, which predicted a force of 40 divisions overwhelming Liège and Namur before rolling into France.⁷⁸ This was clearly an issue for Joffre, whose predecessors had not placed enough stock by reports of German railroad construction on the Belgian border, nor considered the nature of the threat posed by an unopposed passage along the Meuse basin. The resultant 'balance of power paradox' in French planning, Douglas Porch has noted, pushed Joffre's reappraisal of Plan XVI towards a high-risk, offensive strategy that sought to overcome France's perceived 'weaknesses' and obtain an early advantage.⁷⁹ With both the 'defensive' and 'counter-offensive' schools of thought well-distanced by 1911, Joffre's increased power at the head of the army allowed him to develop the tactical doctrine of the *offensive à outrance*

on a strategic level. To this end, France would have the greatest interest in taking the offensive through Belgium first, but diplomatic practicalities proved restrictive.

Apart from the obvious constraints imposed by Belgian neutrality, Joffre's proposals for a pre-emptive advance across the border were rejected because of British sensibilities. Although uncertainty abounded as to Belgium's intentions, it was obvious that it would never countenance such a measure and would likely withdraw the support of the BEF, which had become increasingly prominent in the revision of French plans.⁸⁰ Aware of this, Joffre again approached the Superior Council of National Defence with a proposal to launch an offensive through Belgium immediately upon hearing of a German transgression. This was approved in principle, but the matter did not rest there. The rewards for pre-emptive action were too great to be so easily dismissed, resulting in further suggestions by Théophile Delcassé, the French Naval Minister, that, since Belgian neutrality had been contrived by the British at the expense of France in 1839, perhaps London might be induced to drop its scruples over it to bolster *Entente* relations.⁸¹ This was flatly rejected, as was Joffre's latest proposal on 21 February 1912 of obtaining an 'understanding' with London and Brussels ahead of a French attack. Mutual Anglo-Belgian suspicion following the Congo question precluded such an advance, while it would merely have reinforced the already established fears within Belgium that *Entente* planning cared little for its sovereignty. However, because it offered a greater chance of success than an offensive through Lorraine – with the added benefit of greater British participation, too – France had to seriously consider whether it was worth violating Belgian neutrality rather than accept battle on less favourable terms.⁸² The French President, Raymond Poincaré, used his executive power to hold Joffre and the army in check, though he did make inquiries into Britain's position on Belgium.⁸³

The proposition that 'France might be compelled to take the initiative', as Paul Cambon noted, concerned the British, though Grey refused to be drawn on the matter.⁸⁴ The Second Moroccan Crisis in April 1911 had certainly rendered the matter more urgent, but opinion remained split within the CID as well as the recently informed Cabinet, which was yet to come to terms with Britain's 'moral' commitment to France. In a letter to Grey, dated 30 August 1911, Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, expressed his forthright views on the matter in the following terms:

'Perhaps the time is coming when decisive action will be necessary. Please consider the following policy for us if and when the Morocco negotiations fail. Propose to France and Russia a triple alliance to safeguard (*inter alia*) the independence of Belgium, Holland, and Denmark. Tell Belgium that, if her neutrality is violated, we are prepared to come to her aid and to make an alliance with France and Russia to guarantee her independence. Tell her that we will take whatever military steps will be most

effective for that purpose. But the Belgian Army must take the field in concert with the British and French Armies, and Belgium must immediately garrison Liège and Namur. Otherwise we cannot be responsible for her fate. [...] We should, if necessary, aid Belgium to defend Antwerp and to feed that fortress and any army based on it. We should be prepared at the proper moment to put extreme pressure on the Dutch to keep the Scheldt open for *all* purposes. If the Dutch close the Scheldt, we should retaliate by a blockade of the Rhine.⁸⁵

Although brash, and not necessarily reflective of official policy, it raises a number of points concerning British intentions. Firstly, the French were correct in assuming that, from Britain's perspective, Belgium's neutrality was inviolable. Secondly, that some quarters still favoured decisive action in Belgium. And thirdly, that intervention was entirely predicated on the unknown attitudes of the neutral nations.

The Dutch had emerged as a particular thorn to the Belgian Option. In 1910, under suspected German pressure, The Hague sanctioned the costly redevelopment of the fortification of Flushing, which commanded entry to the Scheldt estuary.⁸⁶ Despite clearly aimed at denying British access to Antwerp, the Dutch insisted that this was not a provocation; it was merely ensuring that Flushing would not fall into a belligerent's hands. Britain had no legal grounds to protest, but concerns were voiced at the CID in April 1911 when two aspects of British planning were considered to be affected. These included; 'general effect on the strategical conditions in a war between the British and German Empires; and, secondly, their particular effect on the strategical conditions of warlike operations which might be undertaken by [the British] in defence of Belgian neutrality'.⁸⁷ The latter was only an issue if Antwerp were to be used as a British base of operations – something yet to be decided upon – but the former implied a genuine concern over German use of Dutch territory in the event of war, which would significantly alter the strategic paradigm. Quite obviously, this was untrue, not least because alterations to the Schlieffen Plan by the Younger Moltke had removed the possibility of a violation of Dutch territory.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, Sir Arthur Hardinge, British Minister to Belgium, was moved to accidentally intimate to Brussels in 1910 that construction of the fort might alter British plans to the point of necessitating a pre-emptive occupation of Antwerp.⁸⁹ Flushing had awakened the Belgian public to the possibility of a German invasion, but such intimations from a supposedly friendly Guarantor were not well received.⁹⁰ When this was followed-up with a program of 'persuasion' and 'intimidation', after Wilson and Bridges' meeting with Jungbluth in early 1911, Brussels began to seriously question *Entente* intentions.⁹¹ Britain's failure to alleviate Belgian anxieties at this juncture,

was just another diplomatic *faux pas* in a mismanaged situation that saw tensions escalate at a time when *Entente* plans depended upon a stable and amenable Belgium.

According to David Stevenson, both the Belgian and Dutch responses to the Second Moroccan Crisis informed all observers of the benefits they offered the Triple Entente. In anticipation of a Franco-German war, both countries cancelled their 1911 manoeuvres and retained classes of soldiers due for release. In Belgium, the fortresses were reinforced and the frontier bridges manned and primed for demolition, while three classes of reservists were on the point of recall before the dispute was settled.⁹² Yet, it was clearly not that evident to the British, whose response to Agadir was to seek further assurances of Belgian intentions through the resumption of staff talks.⁹³ The subtext, however, was concern over a shift in the nature of Anglo-French planning, which saw the BEF's role change significantly. This was borne out of the rise of the *offensive à outrance* school within the French army, which sought to redefine the BEF's role from one of a reserve force to an active element under Joffre's command. Wilson was extremely wary of maintaining the BEF's independence of action, which included the option of advancing into Belgium should the situation arise. This was something the French were unwilling to seriously consider.⁹⁴

Out of concern for the BEF's role in French planning, Wilson began to vigorously re-explore the Belgian option. After a cycling tour along the Franco-Belgian border in October 1911, Wilson returned to Britain to lobby the likes of Arthur Nicolson, the Permanent Under Secretary of Foreign Affairs, and Sir John French, the Chief of the IGS, to lay the groundwork for a resumption of military conversations.⁹⁵ Wilson's opinion was that the BEF, as in 1906, would land in France before operating in conjunction with the Belgian army on the flank of a German advance. Crucially, however, its base of operations would remain in France on account of the uncertainty regarding Dutch permission to use the Scheldt and a desire to retain contact with the French army.⁹⁶ It was on this basis that Bridges approached Jungbluth to reopen negotiations in April 1912.⁹⁷ Little did he know how much Belgian attitudes had evolved.

V

A number of factors had converged in the recent past to engender a reinterpretation of Belgian neutrality by its Foreign Ministry. Not only had Belgium emerged from the annexation of the Congo as a European power of note, but it had awoken to the probability of invasion and had responded with the first of a series of military reforms designed to act as a deterrent. The dynamics of decision-making had shifted since 1906 and gave Belgium a renewed confidence to stand up for its rights as a sovereign state capable and determined to formulate its own defence policy. The *Entente*, and France in particular, had given Léon Arendt, the Political Director at the Belgian Foreign Ministry, enough cause

for suspicion over the past few years to conclude that an invasion was equally as likely to emanate from its side as it was from Germany. Apart from the diplomatic tensions surrounding the annexation of the Congo, reports of French officers on reconnaissance missions on Belgian soil only added weight to the rumours of pre-emptive action.⁹⁸ As such, Belgium adopted a policy of dissuasion towards its Guarantors. All were likely aggressors and all were to receive the same response the Belgian Prime Minister, Charles de Broqueville, was reported to have given to his French counterpart, Joseph Caillaux, on 7 September 1911 – namely that Belgium could put 200,000 men into the field on a war footing to meet any invasion. The caveat was that Belgium could not be expected to meet all incursions into its territory at its frontiers.⁹⁹

What was meant by this was articulated in a November 1911 report by Arendt entitled: *In the Event of War, What Shall We Do?* This document summarised recent soundings taken from officials at the Foreign Ministry, War Ministry and Council of Ministers, and acted as a working premise for Belgian policy in the likely event of an invasion. It was predicated on the likelihood of a German incursion across Belgium's south-eastern corner, but could not exclude the possibility that France might simultaneously cross the border to meet the invading force. In such a scenario, the outnumbered Belgian army, it was argued, would not be compelled under the terms of its neutrality to join the fray and risk its, and the nation's, very existence. Rather, it could adopt a more reserved approach to contain the fighting and safeguard the rest of the neutralised zone.¹⁰⁰ This bold and pragmatic interpretation of its obligations was predicated on the principle that neutrality was but a tool to guarantee independence and did not demand the sacrifice of its defensive capabilities for the sake of a principle that would instantly be rendered redundant. Were there to be a clear violation by one army or another, Belgium would naturally act against it, as was its duty. However, getting caught up in the maelstrom of a mass, continental struggle against all sides was evidently not an option.

Instead, Belgium was to act within the bounds of neutrality and execute it to the best of its ability. Under the terms of the Treaty, Arendt argued that Belgium, '[a]s a sovereign and independent state, [had] a right and a duty to organise its defences as it please[d], without foreign intervention'.¹⁰¹ Consequently, aid by a Guarantor force, which had previously been a given, was now not deemed a pre-requisite to withstanding an invasion. In fact, aid was contingent on a Belgian request and could only be invoked by a Guarantor under the Treaty were Belgium deemed unable to defend itself after it had been attacked.¹⁰² This prohibited a Guarantor, irrespective of intentions, from undertaking pre-emptive action. Were a Guarantor force to arrive, Belgium was under no obligation to become an ally and would in fact be required to conclude a special convention to define the object and extent of that aid in order to safeguard its sovereignty and independence of action. In most hypotheses of a German invasion put forward by the General Staff, the prospect of accepting aid was factored into its

calculations. Joint-action on the Meuse seemed logical, but under no circumstances was a Guarantor force to be given access to its fortifications. Were this to become a sticking point, the General Staff was adamant that aid should be refused. The military authorities were 'unanimous in subordinating, in all circumstances, the observation of neutrality's duties, in a military sense, to the supreme requirements of national defence'.¹⁰³ The question was how to satisfactorily align these interests with its international obligations.

The problem with accepting aid at all, however, was significantly more complicated than it had been in the past. In 1870, Belgium had been able to rely on a neutral Britain to intervene on its behalf and prevent the Franco-Prussian War from spilling across its borders. The *Entente Cordiale* now rendered this unlikely in the event of a French invasion. However, in the ever more likely event of a simultaneous invasion or the declared 'necessity' of intervention by a Guarantor, namely France or Britain, public opinion would not countenance action against what would be perceived as a relieving force.¹⁰⁴ Yet, in contrast to what was being discussed in 1906, this might well take the form of unwarranted pre-emptive action. Reflecting on this, Arendt concluded,

'Altogether, the assistance of a Guarantor, as inevitable as it is, presents great perils and its advantages are, more or less, nil. Once our neutrality is violated by an attempted passage of an entire army, Belgian territory will become and remain the theatre of war. The assistance of the other belligerent [Britain] will not, it must be feared, have any other effect than to extend the battlefield across our soil.'¹⁰⁵

In this instance, what good would assistance be? It would only compromise Belgium vis-à-vis the invading army, which would have no wish to fight as it passed through the country to reach its actual enemy. Even were aid accepted and victory obtained, the Guarantor would use its weight to impose an unfavourable political or military situation on Belgium to ensure its territory would never again be used as a route of invasion. In Arendt's view, Belgium had a right and duty unto itself to remain as aloof as possible and not to make enemies. The best case scenario would be that, at the first transgression by an army, its adversary would move to meet it, leaving the Belgian army free to not take sides but merely act to contain the invasion.¹⁰⁶ In this sense, the Dax pamphlet was not far wide of the mark.

Yet, the reality of the situation would likely be more complicated. This was not least because a Guarantor might seek to arrange for Belgium to enter a future war on its side. The massing of enemy

troops on the frontiers might be used as a reason to invoke the Treaty due to the evident intention of the other belligerent to attack. London was viewed as the most likely culprit. The details of the *Entente Cordiale* were unknown to the Belgians, but it was likely that a German invasion of the neutral zone would give it the cause and means to send a force to the Continent; ideally via Antwerp. Britain had always considered itself the guardian of Belgian integrity.¹⁰⁷ However, there were accompanying suspicions that its interests lay primarily in Antwerp and that a pre-emptive landing there was a distinct possibility. Antwerp would provide the BEF with a base from which to operate against a German envelopment. The fear, in Belgium, was that pre-emptive *Entente* action would give the German army an immediate pretext to cross the frontier but, this time, without cause to restrict its operations to the south-eastern corner. As such, Arendt proposed, it was unquestionably in Belgium's interest to dissuade and resist any pre-emptive moves by its Guarantors. However, this would need to be followed up by a show of arms to demonstrate Belgian willingness to defend its neutrality against whichever belligerent deigned to violate it first. Thus, when Bridges met with Jungbluth to reopen military conversations on 23 April 1912, the diplomatic climate had evolved significantly. Belgium no longer saw much advantage to military co-operation unless it was on its terms and after a violation. More to the point, Belgian officials were highly sceptical of *Entente* machinations.

At the first meeting the two men discussed the means by which a British intervention could best help Belgium under the premise, 'Germany has invaded Belgium – what shall we do?' Among other things, Bridges inquired as to the feasibility of British landings at Oostende, Zeebrugge and Antwerp.¹⁰⁸ He was authorised to suggest that a possible British force of 160,000 men, consisting of six infantry divisions and eight cavalry brigades, would be available for intervention. As the conversations progressed, Bridges recalled in his memoirs, 'On one occasion I was asked what would be Great Britain's attitude if Germany invaded Belgium and Belgium did not appeal for help'. The attaché replied that he 'had no authority to say but that [he] felt sure that the British Government would regard intervention under the terms of the Treaty as not only a duty but a right. At the same time [he] added, an appeal for help from Belgium would enormously strengthen the hand of [the British] Government by rousing the sentiment of the country.'¹⁰⁹ Further damage was done when Bridges revealed that it was generally assumed that the Belgian army would be incapable, even if it did fight, to halt a German advance, therefore necessitating British aid at the decisive point and time to have any serious effect. This may well have been the case militarily, but Belgian sovereignty was at stake. Guarantor or not, Britain had no right to simply 'move into Belgium and expel German troops from Belgian soil', as was being suggested, without prior consent.¹¹⁰ Indeed, any unwarranted *Entente* incursion would have been no different to the German invasion it sought to counter.

This was the turning point in the conversations. Belgian officials were outraged, and Jungbluth made it perfectly clear that any pre-emptive British landing would be seen as a violation, whilst he flatly rejected the view that his forces were incapable of checking a German advance. The Belgian army had been significantly reformed in recent years, removing many of the vices that had previously concerned foreign observers. Moreover, ample provision for defending the most likely route of attack through Belgian Luxembourg had been made in response to intelligence received concerning German preparations in the Eifel region.¹¹¹ Bridges' comments served only to amplify concerns that the *Entente's* own military conversations had resulted in the drawing-up of plans involving Belgium without its consent under the pretext of guaranteeing neutrality.¹¹² Jungbluth had already alerted Bridges in September 1911 that France, not Germany, was seen as the most likely aggressor, stating: 'To say nothing of the strategical conditions, the financial situation in Germany was so bad that this fact, coupled with bad harvests, drought, and general depression, would make a war most impolitic for her. France, on the other hand, was richer than ever, and public opinion firm. The French press was a dangerous factor in the situation, and it must not be forgotten that a Frenchman was capable of anything.'¹¹³ Further credence was added in late 1912 when French military preparations on its northern border were stepped up and accompanied by an approach to ascertain Belgian attitudes towards an 'entente between Guarantor Powers and the Guaranteed State'.¹¹⁴ This could only mean one thing, and Belgium was now confident enough in its own sovereignty to reject it outright.

From Belgium's viewpoint, the talks were a complete failure and confirmed its worst fears of becoming isolated in the midst of European politics in the post-Agadir world. Britain's *rapprochement* with France in the preceding years meant that it could no longer be dealt with as a detached, uncommitted, benevolent power.¹¹⁵ From the *Entente's* perspective, continued uncertainty over Belgian intentions prevented it from formulating a coherent and definitive plan of action in the event of a German invasion. Recognition of the Congo and reassurances following the Bridges affair were not forthcoming and displayed an underestimation of Belgian sensibilities towards the international situation. Indeed, it took until April 1913 for Grey to hear of the Bridges debacle through the Count de Lalaing, the Belgian ambassador to London. The Foreign Secretary immediately wrote to Sir Francis Villiers, the British ambassador to Brussels, asking him to appease any lingering fears of British mal intentions.¹¹⁶ On his side, Grey spoke to de Lalaing of 'the bizarre notion you have that we might violate your neutrality just as much as the French or Germans.' He added, 'I can assure you that Britain, at least under the current Liberal Government, could never be brought to do such a thing. On the contrary, we have but one thought and that is to protect neutrals. I think that this strange suspicion of British intentions must have been submitted to the Belgian public by the Germans, who perhaps have reason to make it plausible.'¹¹⁷ When told that it was British officers who had planted such

notions, Grey replied with, 'Well then, never would we pre-emptively send our troops into Belgium before your neutrality has been violated. You can be sure of that.'¹¹⁸ Unfortunately, the moment had already passed. Belgian preparations for war developed under the assumption that they were very much alone. As Beyens commented in 1915, 'No more in 1912 than in 1906, there was never concluded, nor even discussed, a convention between Belgium and England, or between Belgium and France, which never offered us its military aid in the defence of our neutrality.'¹¹⁹

VI

Throughout the entire period under consideration, the Great Powers paid special attention to Belgium without fully acknowledging the agency it possessed to develop its own plans independently of theirs. An inability to comprehend this fact led to a situation whereby few were convinced of the attitude it would adopt when confronted by war. Eyre Crowe, with characteristic foresight, predicted that Belgium would resist a German invasion upon the outbreak of hostilities – but this seemed far from certain after 1912.¹²⁰ Despite significant organisational developments, including the introduction of universal conscription in May 1913, few believed the Belgian army capable of more than token resistance. Yet its field army, which was due to swell to an unprecedented 340,000 by 1925, could mobilise quicker than its adversaries and adopt positions in support of the fortress system to ward off a transgressor. Indeed, of the fourteen staff rides conducted between 1897 and 1913, officers examined the possibilities of repulsing a French invasion seven times, a German invasion six times, and a British invasion once.¹²¹ Although not necessarily indicative of war planning, these scenarios still reflected the diplomatic climate of the period and Belgium's commitment to its own defence.

However, a defined diplomatic response to an invasion and a restructuring of the army did not necessarily translate to a coherent operational plan. Not only were fissures opened when the General Staff wrested significant powers away from the Ministry of War in 1911, with the establishment of the Superior Council of National Defence in 1911, but also continuity of thought was frequently disrupted by the high turnover of senior officers in the years preceding the outbreak of war. Five of the army's eleven Lieutenant-Generals were due to retire before the end of 1912.¹²² Among them was Jungbluth, who had taken over as Chief of the General Staff aged 63 in 1910. This precipitated a crisis of command, not least because the nomination of Major-General Dufour to succeed him was challenged by two officers on the grounds of seniority. Both Lieutenant-General De Ceuninck and Major-General T'Serclaes threatened to resign should they be overlooked.¹²³ The delay in confirming the nomination caused friction because it opened the Catholic Government up to accusations from the Left that Dufour was being denied the post on account of his anticlerical views and his suspected association with Freemasonry.¹²⁴ Whether this, or other reasons, resulted in the

appointment of De Ceuninck later that summer is unclear, but it marked another episode of unwarranted stress in Belgian civil-military relations at what was a crucial juncture in its military preparations. Moreover, it did little to alter the general situation.

Within two years De Ceuninck also retired, precipitating another change at the head of the military establishment. The questionable appointment of Lieutenant-General Antonin De Selliers de Moranville, aged 62, was again commented on by the press. *La Chronique* noted, 'in spite of the post's importance, we appear to consider it [...] as merely an honourable end to a career'.¹²⁵ This turnover had potentially devastating effects. Under Jungbluth, plans had been developed by Belgium's most promising Staff officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Baron de Ryckel, to abandon the policy of central mobilisation in favour of concentrating forces nearer the frontiers. It reflected the post-1911 appreciation within certain quarters of the French-inspired *offensive à outrance*, which might see the Belgian army operate more aggressively than had previously been envisaged.¹²⁶ These ideas had found approval with the King, whose military advisor, Émile Galet, was himself an advocate of fighting on the frontiers, albeit on the defensive.¹²⁷ Yet, with the appointments of De Ceuninck and De Selliers, de Ryckel's ideas were cast aside. De Selliers, who had been at the head of the Gendarmerie since 1904, was completely detached from the latest currents of strategic thinking. Neither blessed with originality nor dynamism, he merely reverted to the age-old concept of central mobilisation and operational defence. As late as 30 July 1914, De Selliers submitted a memorandum dictating the withdrawal of divisions from the Meuse to the central plain, but the King objected and ordered mobilisation to commence across the country's garrisons instead.¹²⁸ Although somewhat outpaced by events, which prevented the army from concentrating as much force on the Meuse as desired, it was able to adopt positions facing all borders by 3 August in accordance with its neutral status. Unable to operate as aggressively as some would have liked, the Belgian army improvised to meet the German threat towards Liège the following day, fighting a delaying action until the weight of numbers and heavy shell forced its retreat towards Antwerp.

VII

The Belgian army's preparations for war were somewhat shambolic. Few could say it was truly ready by 1914. Over-confidence among the political elite that neutrality and independence would be respected after 1870, sadly offered its likely aggressors encouragement to betray this faith. Delays in the introduction of universal conscription, a lack of general investment in its defensive system and conflicting views in strategic thinking all contributed to opening the country up to Great Power interference. While German planners had all but disregarded Belgian neutrality by the 1890s, the *Entente* – particularly Britain – continued to nominally express a desire to see the Treaty of London

respected. As such, preparations for a future Franco-German war became intimately tied to Belgium's seemingly discordant attitude towards neutrality. The staff talks of 1906 and 1912 were as much an attempt to obtain assurances over Belgian intentions as they were to develop a coherent, but unbinding, plan of action. Although initially valued by the Belgians, these approaches came to nothing as diplomatic incidents caused a cooling in relations. Belgium was forced to contemplate the prospect of facing an invasion alone, whilst Britain fell increasingly into joint-planning with the French. Amidst the mutual suspicion and the increasing tensions, the need to secure Belgium's strategic advantages consumed the *Entente*, who failed to fully comprehend the ramifications of its actions. Suggestions in 1912 that Belgian sovereignty might be subverted in order to gain the strategic initiative reflected the perceived military weakness of the kingdom, but neglected Belgium's growth as a nation since 1839. Having arrived as a European power, it could now act and expect to be treated accordingly.

Neutrality, but particularly independence, dominated Belgian preparations. Evidence suggested that neither Germany nor France were prepared to forgo the advantages that renegeing on their Treaty obligations would offer. In Britain, however, Belgium had a long-standing supporter that appeared to respect its rights. Yet, a combination of factors, including *Entente* diplomatic mismanagement, caused Belgian planners to take note of the realities of the situation and to confront them with a previously unseen strength of character. In contrast to 1906, Belgium was no longer prepared to entertain the notion of military co-operation with any of its Guarantors. If war came to Belgium, it preferred to retain the liberty of action to act in its own best interests. As such, the deployment of the BEF became wedded to operations in France, despite continued preference for independent action in Belgium. In the end, as Keith Wilson posited, '[t]he BEF was sent off because it existed; to France because it was thought the French needed it, because all pre-war planning had been for the sake of the French, and the premise for it that the French would otherwise be defeated.'¹²⁹ From Joffre's point of view, French action through Belgium was prohibited by the Government on diplomatic grounds, resulting in the implementation of Plan XVII and the costly thrust towards the lost provinces. Only once Brussels appealed for help to its guarantors on 4 August 1914 could the *Entente* contemplate moving into Belgium; though, by this point, the strategic initiative had largely been lost.

¹ Antoine De Schrijver, *La Bataille de Liège (Août 1914)* (Liège: Vaillante-Carmanne, 1922), 2; Albert de Selliers de Mornville, *Contribution à l'histoire de la Guerre Mondiale 1914-1918* (Brussels: Goemaere, 1933), 627; Émile Wanty, *Le Milieu Militaire Belge de 1831 à 1914* (Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1957), 257; and Luc De Vos, *Première Guerre Mondiale* (Braine-l'Alleud: J.M. Collet, 1997), 23.

² Tom Simoens, 'Het Belgische Leger', in Luc De Vos (et.al.), *14-18 Oorlog in België* (Leuven: Davidsfonds Uitgeverij, 2014), 33.

³ See multiple contributions in, E. Witte (et.al), *Natie en Democratie 1890-1921: Acta van het interuniversitair colloquium, Brussel 8-9 juni 2006* (Brussels: KVAB, 2007); and Philippe Destatte, Catherine Lanneau & Fabrice

Meurant-Pailhe (eds), *Jules Destrée. Le Lettre au roi, et au-delà, 1912-2012. Actes du colloque des 24 et 25 avril 2012* (Liège & Namur: Musée de la Vie wallonne & Institut Destrée, 2013).

⁴ *Le Soir*, 31 Aug; 1, 2, 3, 7, 21 Sep; 9, 12, 15, Oct; and 1, 4, 9, 28, 29 Nov 1911.

⁵ Victor Ducarne, *Supplément au Bulletin de la Défense National de Janvier 1911: Conférence donnée le 29 novembre 1911 à la Conférence du Jeune Barreau par le Lieutenant general Ducarne: La question militaire en Belgique*. (Brussels, 1911), 15.

⁶ Mario Draper, *The Belgian Army and Society from Independence to the Great War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 114-121.

⁷ Jacques Willequet, 'Appréciations allemandes sur la valeur de l'armée belge et les perspectives de guerre avant 1914', *International Review of Military History*, 20 (1959), 635-639; and Albert Duchesne, 'Appréciations françaises sur la valeur de l'armée belge et les perspectives de guerre de 1871 à 1914', *Carnet de la Fourragère*, 14 (2) (1961), 117; and, 14 (3) (1961), 183-4, & 188-205.

⁸ A brief overview may be found in, Robert Foley, *Alfred von Schlieffen's Military Writings* (London & Portland: Frank Cass, 2012); Douglas Porch, 'French war plans, 1914: The 'Balance of Power Paradox'', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 29 (1) (2006), 117-144; John Gooch, *The Plans of War: The General Staff and British Military Strategy c.1900-1916* (New York: Halsted Press, 1974); and Richard F. Hamilton, *War Planning 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁹ Among these exceptions are, Daniel H. Thomas, *The Guarantee of Belgian Independence in European Diplomacy 1830's-1930's* (Rhode Island: D.H. Thomas Publishing, 1983); Samuel R. Williamson, 'Joffre Reshapes French Strategy, 1911-1913' in Paul M. Kennedy (ed), *The War Plans of the Great Powers 1880-1914* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 133-154; Jonathan E. Helmreich, 'Belgian Concern over Neutrality and British Intentions, 1906-1914', *The Journal of Modern History*, 36 (1964), 416-27; David Stevenson, 'Battlefield or Barrier?' Rearmament and Military Planning in Belgium, 1902-1914', *The International History Review*, 29 (3) (2007), 473-507.

¹⁰ J. Steinberg, 'A German Plan for the Invasion of Holland and Belgium, 1897', in Kennedy, *War Plans*, 160-2.

¹¹ Recent scholarship has suggested that Britain's continentalism remained rather limited beyond this. See, Hew Strachan, 'The British Army, Its General Staff and the Continental Commitment, 1904-14', in David French and Brian Holden Reid, (eds), *The British General Staff: Reform and Innovation, 1890-1939* (London: F. Cass, 2002), 68; and Matthew S. Seligmann, 'Failing to Prepare for the Great War? The Absence of Grand Strategy in British War Planning before 1914', *War in History*, Open Access Article, (2017), 1-24.

¹² Bernhard Dernburg, *The Case of Belgium In the Light of Official Reports found in the Secret Archives of the Belgian Government after the Occupation of Brussels with Facsimiles of the Documents* (New York: International Monthly, 1915); and Émile Waxweiler, *La Guerre de 1914: La Belgique neutre et loyale* (Paris: Librairie Payot & Cie, 1915).

¹³ Baron Beyens, *Germany before the War* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1916) (translated by P.V. Cohn), 320.

¹⁴ Alfred De Ridder, 'Encore les conventions anglo-belges', *La Revue catholique des idées et des faits* (1931), 7; Jacques Armand Wullus-Rudiger, *La Belgique et l'Équilibre Européen* (Paris: Berger-Levaul, 1935), 62; and French military attaché's reaction do the debate in, Chardigny to Maginot, 11 Dec. 1930, and Chardigny to Barthou, 19 Dec. 1930, [Vincennes: Sêrvicê Historique de Défense], GR 7 N 2724.

¹⁵ Statement by Major-General N.W. Barnardiston, M.V.O. with regard to conversations with General Ducarne at Brussels in 1906, Dec. 1916 [Basil Liddell Hart Military Archives, King's College London] Barnardiston Papers, 3/2. I would like to thank the Trustees of the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London for permission to use and reproduce material from the Barnardiston Papers.

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