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THE UNIVERSITY OF KENT

The Belgian Army, Society and Military Cultures, 1830-1918

Being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of
Kent

By

Mario A. Draper

February 2016

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Abstract

This thesis examines the conflicted relationship between the Belgian army and society from its independence in 1830 through to the end of the First World War in 1918. It assesses the role that the army played as a tool of nation building in what was a culturally, geographically, linguistically, and politically fractured country. Ultimately, the work argues that the army largely failed in this role as political interference in the institution restricted its ability to impact positively on the youth entrusted to its care. The machinations of the two dominant parties, the Catholics and the Liberals, helped reinforce local ties as opposed to fostering a wider sense of nationhood. The military implications were manifold. Not only was the army slow, within a continental context, to adopt conscription, only doing so in 1913, but the strong sense of anti-militarism within society equally held successive governments to account over necessary financial contributions towards other aspects of the military, such as the Civic Guard and the fortresses. When coupled with the issue of language among a majority Flemish rank and file commanded by a predominantly French-speaking officer corps, there was a real fear among domestic and foreign commentators that Belgium's ability to uphold its unique imposed neutrality in the event of a future war was limited. Notwithstanding, its performance during the First World War was surprising and marked a brief interlude in the contested domestic affairs of the long nineteenth century, as opposition against the 'other' rallied the nation behind a single cause. It demonstrated that, despite an entrenched parochialism, multiple associations with the concept of Belgian nationality were extant, but required the crisis of the Great War in order to be clearly expressed.

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Abbreviations

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

Author's Note

The spelling of place names has been chosen on the following basis for ease of understanding for a work in the English language. In the event where a place name has an accepted English equivalent, such as Brussels, this has been used instead of Brussel or Bruxelles. Similarly, the common usage of Ypres among English readers lends itself to the use of this spelling despite being the Gallicised version of Ieper. Barring such exceptions, place names have been spelled in the dominant language of the region in which they are situated. For example, Mechelen is used as opposed to Malines due its linguistic orientation towards Flemish, whilst Liège is used as opposed to Luik by the same logic due to its location in a predominantly French-speaking area. This has been entirely at the author's discretion and by no means attempts to portray anything other than an understandable system for the Anglophone reader.

Introduction

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

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

tradition.¹ This was, of course, very important given the region's centrality to the wars of Europe. Resistance against the foreign occupier was a simple refrain for those desiring to uncover the roots of a common identity. The Brabant uprising against Austrian rule in 1789-90 was a localised demonstration of this at the dawn of the age of nationalism, though it was the Revolution against Dutch rule in 1830 that historians have used as the genesis of the wider nation. Charles Terlinden, for example, argued that the Revolution of 1830 would not have succeeded without the persistence of national consciousness among the masses, whose use of a tricolour as a symbol of unification ought not to go unnoticed.² This was corroborated by Émile Wanty in his seminal work on the Belgian army, in which he noted the centrifugal force of the Brussels barricades in drawing together the revolutionary militias being raised *ad hoc* around the country. In total eighty communes were represented in the engagements in and around the capital.³

The importance of local aspects in the Revolution, and the subsequent establishment of a national identity, was highlighted in a colloquium on Belgian military history in Brussels in 1980. A variety of contributors examined the individual roles of Bruges, Liège, Gent, Tournai, Brussels and Antwerp in the struggle against Dutch forces as well as the inter-relationship between them. It demonstrated the belief that the success of the Revolution was the sum of its constituent parts, which lent

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

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

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

towards the concept of a wider, all-encompassing, national movement.⁴ Yet, whilst drawing out cultural and religious commonalities that were diametrically opposed to Dutch rule, the local approach actually demonstrated how unique responses to the Revolution were as well. Similar remarks can be made regarding the social groupings of the nation, whose motivations for participating to a greater or lesser degree varied according to circumstance.

Els Witte has recently contended that the only unifying factor among these disparate elements of the population was economic. By the late 1820s, the South Netherlands (i.e. Belgium) was being exploited as part of a protectionist policy defending the interests of the northern Protestants. The southern, largely Catholic, population contributed towards 50% of the national debt despite being responsible for only 20%, a situation that affected all tiers of society. Only when faced with an economic crisis in 1829-30, which resulted in high unemployment among artisans and labourers, were the conditions for revolution achieved. Other contributing factors, such as William I's decision to bring education under State control, to the chagrin of the Catholic Clergy, similarly incited agitation, though not to the extent of provoking a wide-scale reaction.⁵ The concept of the nation state requires society to come together on certain principles and accept the State's power and control. The building of Belgium was on a politico-ideological basis of liberalism that opposed despotic rule. Only through extensive dissemination of journalistic critiques under the specific

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

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

circumstances that were present in 1830 was a political consciousness mobilized across social and geographical divides. This demonstrated how nationalism was not a vital ingredient in the development of the liberal Belgian State, which Witte argues still lacked a unified identity beyond the 1830s.⁶

Theoretical works on the study of nationalism have tended to emphasize the fluidity in the formation of, and association with, an identity. Marnix Beyen and Maarten Van Ginderachter note that ‘Identification is not a zero-sum game where one identity supplants the other’, rather that numerous, and often competing strands allow individuals to identify with different groups at different times depending on the specific circumstances. The example used is that of Galicia where the population considered themselves ‘Germans’ in opposition to their co-inhabitant Czechs, Slovenes and Italians, but otherwise professed profound regional ties, which remained indifferent to strong nationalist pressure groups.⁷ Similar trends can be viewed in Belgium, where entrenched regionalism prevailed in spite of elite-led, State-driven attempts at constructing nationality through vehicles such as language. This was partly on account of the masses not identifying solely with these constructions, rather transforming, appropriating or inverting them to form their own concept of the nation.⁸ In many ways, the Flemish sub-nation that emerged reflected the model of ethno-nationalism, which values ‘natural’ communities based on race, biology, common descent, language and culture. This was opposed to civic-nationalism espoused by the State that encouraged

⁶ Ibid., pp. 42-46 & 112-114.

⁷ M. Beyen & M. Van Ginderachter, ‘General Introduction: Writing the Mass into a Mass phenomenon’ in M. Van Ginderachter & M. Beyen (eds.), *Nationhood from Below, Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2012), pp. 8-9.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 7-8.

citizens to choose to be a part of a nation.⁹ Given the diversity of the population and its motivations in the 1830 Revolution, it cannot be considered ‘ethnic’, and required a move towards ‘civic’ factors in the aftermath to construct a unified national identity. However, as Van Ginderachter argues, no individual falls fully into one category.¹⁰ Therefore the *mélange* between the two poles can go some way to explaining why regional and national identities continued to clash in Belgium in the time period under consideration, and why the State felt continuously bound to promote ‘civic’ values that would draw the nation together.

In language and the army, the State believed it had a ready-made conveyance for nationalism. Following the idea of the French Revolutionary armies, the ability to inculcate a large cross-section of the nation’s youth with shared experiences, education and values whilst under arms, and being commanded in a single language, was seen as the best method of breaking regional bonds in favour of a national identity.¹¹ The idea that the army, through its system of national recruitment, was a ‘melting-pot’ from which a greater homogeneity might emanate, formed the basis of an article by Richard Boijen. In it, he established that a process of ‘Frenchification’ characterised the early years to the point where Flemings, in both civilian and military life, accepted the position as second-rate citizens.¹² This was despite their proportion of the population

⁹ M. Van Ginderachter, ‘How Useful is the Concept of Ethnolinguistic Nationalism? On Imagined Communities, the Ethnic-Civic Dichotomy and Banal Nationalism’, in P. Broomans (et. al.) (eds.), *The Beloved Mothertongue: Ethnolinguistic Nationalism in Small Nations: Inventories and Reflections* (Peeters, Leuven, Paris & Dudley, MA, 2008), p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

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

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

out-numbering Wallonia's by 2:1. It demonstrated an early degree of success in civic-nationalism, though was undermined by the awakening of the Flemish movement in the 1850s, which took on a much more aggressive ethnolinguistic character that grew in prominence over the course of the nineteenth century.

Other countries faced similar difficulties in the relationship between their armies and societies. As John Gooch and Douglas Porch have pointed out in their studies of the Italian and French armies respectively, one way in which the authorities maintained the status quo in their favour during the nineteenth century was to utilise the citizen army as a tool to educate and transform society; even going as far as using it as the building block of a nation-state. For example, the countering of regional factionalism was at the heart of Fanti's drive to foster a sense of *Italianità* into the newly formed Italian nation in the 1860s. This was achieved through a form of national recruiting, which saw units draw men from two separate geographical regions, thus using the army 'primarily as an instrument of reunification.'¹³ However, the fact that only a quarter of the male population performed active service meant that the scheme was heavily flawed, with a large proportion of society remaining firmly out of the army's educational reach. In France, by contrast, conscription and the idea of a nation-in-arms largely succeeded in forging national unity, bringing together men from various regions and social backgrounds. This, coupled with the ritualistic call up of successive conscript classes, solidified the respect for civic duty and the national ideal across multiple generations.¹⁴

¹³ J. Gooch, *Army, State and Society in Italy, 1870–1915* (MacMillan Press, Basingstoke, 1989), pp. 10 & 21.

¹⁴ D. Porch, *The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871-1914* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981), pp. 32 & 204.

Although the French may have used the army well as a vehicle for promoting national unity, it was a long way off from being the perfect example of state expression. Political intrigue amongst the uniquely socially inclusive officer corps led to a degree of instability, which often filtered down into the regimental system. Radical Governments continuously attempted to republicanise the officer corps to ensure it was trustworthy. This was done through taking promotion out of the military's control and into civilian hands by way of the Minister of War. Though historians have largely agreed that this republicanisation failed, it is a clear example of the unrest in French civil-military relations, which often shook the institution to its very core. Indeed, Porch notes that even among individual regiments, who by their regional recruiting attempted to create links between the army and society in their respective localities, the infiltration of local concerns, interests and politics were not uncommon, leading to a relaxing of discipline.¹⁵

In contrast, Hew Strachan, Edward Spiers and David French, in their studies of the British Army, have concluded that the social exclusivity of the officer corps, in particular, helped keep the army apolitical.¹⁶ Indeed, Spiers wrote of how the purchase system 'buttressed the State by attracting officers from families whose status, privileges and possessions were already protected by the State itself', thus ensuring their allegiance.¹⁷ Whilst it can be said that the elite chose to serve, in order to confirm their social status, the rank and file - obtained through voluntary recruitment - were often driven to a career in the army through desperation.¹⁸ In many ways the army reflected

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 120-121.

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

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

¹⁸ David French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, & the British People c.1870-2000* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005), p. 37.

the society from which it was drawn. In contrast to its French counterpart, the British rank and file expected to be led by its social superiors, which reinforced the class structure of the nation. The evolving concept of a gentleman, in turn, promoted Christian values, which were implicit in *noblesse oblige* and the realisation of their paternalistic duty towards the other ranks.¹⁹ In some ways, this strengthened the relationship between officers and men despite the inherent social gulf between them, whilst conscription, as Gooch notes, often increased class distinction.²⁰

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

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

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

With the exception of Emile Wanty's and Luc De Vos' overviews of the Belgian army as an institution, few other works have successfully examined the convoluted relationship between the army and society.²¹ Old military histories, focusing primarily on the laws governing the structural changes or the exploits of campaigns, have tended to dominate the historiography of the nineteenth century. From the earliest writings of De Ryckel, and Terlinden, through to the more recent general studies of Lecleir, Grisard and Gerrard, the predominant focus of attentions has been on the organisational failings that led to the shambolic mobilisation of 1870 and on the delayed reforms thereafter that compromised the army in 1914.²² With scant reference to the social and political reasons behind these military developments, little in the way of understanding the army's relationship with society can truly be said to emerge.

By contrast, Wanty assesses the impact of politics on the army and demonstrates how social considerations affected important military considerations. For example, a major consideration of his work concerning the development of the officer corps in the immediate decades following the Revolution was the influence of language. This inhibited the development of an homogenous corps due to the advantages received by the French-speaking Walloon candidates over their Flemish counterparts.²³ However, due to his chronological approach, he fails to continue the exploration of this important theme beyond the 1840s, due to its secondary importance in the second half of the

²¹ Wanty, *Milieu*; and L. De Vos, *Het Effectief van de Belgische Krijgsmacht en de Militiewetgeving, 1830-1914* (Brussels, 1985).

²² A. De Ryckel, *Historique de l'Établissement Militaire de la Belgique* Tome I & II (Gent, 1907); Terlinden, *Historie Militaire*; L.A. Lecleir, *L'Indanterie: Filiations et Traditions* (Brussels, 1973); J. Gerrard, *L'Armée Belge 1830-1980* (Meddens, Brussels, 1978); and A. Grisard, *Histoire de l'Armée Belge de 1830 à nos Jours. Tome I De 1830 à 1919* (Tournai, 1982).

²³ Wanty, *Milieu*, pp. 33-39.

nineteenth century compared to the conscription debate. Similar accusations can be made with regards to his interesting ideas concerning the development of a national identity through national recruitment, and the strategic role of the Civic Guard within the military establishment that are only briefly considered within a restrictive temporal framework.²⁴ Wanty's appreciation of the rank and file only stretches to the conscription crisis, the wastage in terms of recalls and illness, and a brief description of the regional recruiting adopted by the army after 1913. However, one interesting point, regarding discipline was raised. Wanty demonstrates quite clearly through his figures that a far higher proportion of military offenders were actually paid substitutes rather than the annual balloted man.²⁵ Into this, one can read a condemnation of substitution, though the political dimensions surrounding the debate might have been expanded upon. Wanty's overall conclusion sits alongside those of many others who bemoaned Belgian apathy towards the military establishment until it was too late.²⁶

Perhaps the most complete work on Belgium's armed forces to date is Luc De Vos', *Het Effectief van de Belgische Krijgsmacht en de Militiewetgeving, 1830-1914*. Among the key ideas expressed in this study is the urban/rural conflict, which filtered into politics and subsequently influenced decisions regarding the army. For instance, the 1887 d'Oultremont conscription Bill became a battle between the government, backed by the urban middle classes, who wished to defend their interests following a series of riots challenging their social position, and the rural population backed by the city of Antwerp who saw it as a blight on commerce and a waste of good labour.²⁷ Indeed, political wrangling, and the growing socialist party and electorate, played a

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 46-47 & 171.

²⁵ Wanty, *Milieu*, p. 126.

²⁶ Gerrard, *L'Armée Belge*, p. 14; and Grisard, *Histoire de l'Armée Belge*, p. 280.

²⁷ De Vos, *Het Effectief*, pp. 230-252.

significant role in military reform throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Not only were successive Catholic governments increasingly wary of allowing Flemish youths to mix with socialist Walloons on account of growing fears of declining religious faith instigated by a heightened sense of atheism amongst the urban population, but they held the King to ransom over it by refusing to endorse his foreign adventures if he backed the call for the introduction of conscription. Indeed, impetus from the Catholic lower-middle classes managed to see the introduction of a voluntary scheme of recruiting from 1902 until 1909 following the change in the electoral system to one of proportional representation. Although voluntary recruitment largely failed and ironically produced the circumstances under which conscription was finally adopted, it demonstrated the influence of the electorate and the political parties upon military reform. Linked to this, De Vos shows how successive Governments throughout the nineteenth century were torn between regional and national recruitment as they attempted to balance military requirements with social demands. By 1914, the Flemish proportion of the army was 59.28%, 2% over their share of the population.²⁸ De Vos demonstrates that, in this sense at least, the army generally reflected society. Unfortunately, however, the political angle and focus on reform mean that, like Wanty, De Vos rejects a systematic study of the army's social composition over the period, the auxiliary forces and the army's wartime performance are neglected. As such, no conclusions can be drawn from how these reforms and social issues reacted to the testing environment of 1914-1918.

Despite its disregard in many general histories of the army, some good work has been carried out of the auxiliary forces with regards to their relationship with society. In particular, R. Coenen's study of the Antwerp Civic Guard revealed the

²⁸ Ibid., p. 398.

politicisation of the largely middle-class force. In his rejection of Wanty and F. Van Kalken's works as superficial, Coenen proceeds to explore in detail the political and social context in which Antwerp's civilian force established itself as a mirror image of the class structure of the city.²⁹ Indeed, some 75% of the force was comprised of tradesmen or those in industry, and the officers were largely of a higher social standing than those in the ranks.³⁰ Over time though, this division became less pronounced as the officer corps and the rank and file evolved into a more commercial-employee dominated force at the expense of the retailers and artisans of the early years. Despite providing a considered insight into the relationship between the auxiliary forces and the city of Antwerp, this work is rather narrow in its approach.

Other notable works on the auxiliary forces, such as E.A. Jacobs' series of articles on the formation of its individual units, and his overview of the Civic Guard's association with the British Rifle Volunteers through shooting contests in the 1860s, have failed to significantly alter the understanding of the force's overall social, political and strategic position in Belgium.³¹ Indeed, only Patrick Lefèvre's work on their use in

²⁹ Wanty's chapter in *Milieu Militaire Belge* refers primarily to its organisation and role, whilst F. Van Kalken, *Commotions populaires en Belgique. 1834-1902* (Office de Publicité, Brussels, 1936) lacks depth of research and analysis regarding the force, preferring to focus on mechanisms behind the uprisings, which they were called out to control, instead.

³⁰ R. Coenen, 'De Politieke en Sociale Gebondenheid van de Antwerpse Burgerwacht, 1830 – 1914', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 19, no. 4, (1971), p. 322.

³¹ E.A. Jacobs, 'Les Emblemes de la Garde Civique 1830-1914', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 19, no. 8, (1972), pp. 695–716; vol. 20, no. 2, (1973), pp. 147-178; vol. 20, no. 3, (1973), pp. 276-308; vol. 20, no. 5, (1974), pp. 363-394; 'Garde Civique Belge et Riflemen Anglais', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 17, no. 4, (1967), pp. 306-330; and 'Un portrait de Léopold II et la coupe de Wimbledon', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 17, no. 8, (1968), pp. 607-628. Interestingly, I.F.W. Beckett also mentions the *Garde Civique's* encounters with the Rifle Volunteers in *Riflemen Form: A Study of the Rifle Volunteer Movement 1859-1908* (The Ogilby Trusts, Aldershot, 1982), p. 114.

the maintenance of public order lends any further insights to the debate.³² The difficulties in integrating the auxiliaries into the country's military strategy were compounded by their role as an aid to the civil power. This was also the case for the small mounted police force of the Gendarmerie who, in their penny-packets, were to maintain law and order in the countryside whilst also to be prepared to swell the ranks of the cavalry should the necessity arise.³³ Issues stemmed from an unknown source of authority, especially when used as an aid to the civil power. Both the civil and military commanders of the districts believed that it was their prerogative to call out the Civic Guard to aid the authorities, but this often led to misuses of the auxiliaries.³⁴ The legal aspect of these incidents have been well documented, but the social, political and strategic ramifications have scope for further study.

Despite the Civic Guard's proposed role in national defence, there is a surprisingly limited amount of work regarding this particular issue or even strategic policy in general. The country's inheritance of a number of fortresses following its independence, coupled with the general apathy towards the army as a result of an uncompromising belief in the power of neutrality, meant fixed positions became the basis of defence. Despite it being pivotal to the Belgian army, fortifications have remained largely untouched by historical analysis. Jacky Marchal's work on the Namur fortress and Robert Gils and Simon Stevinstichting's on the national redoubt at Antwerp appear to stand alone in the field concerning nineteenth century fortress policy.³⁵ The

³² P. Lefèvre, 'Le Maintien de l'ordre au niveau provincial', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 25, no. 3, (1983), pp. 201-229.

³³ For more on the *Gendarmerie*, see the KLM (ed.), *Historie de la Gendarmerie de 1830 à nos Jours* (Musée Royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire Militaire, Brussels, 1979).

³⁴ For one such event see, L. Keunings, 'L'Armée et le Maintien de l'Ordre au XIXème Siècle. L'Affaire Capiaumont (1857)', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 30, no. 7, (1994), pp. 493-538.

³⁵ J. Marchal, *La Garnison de Namur 1830-2003* (Les amis de la Citadelle de Namur, Namur, 2003); and Robert Gils & Simon Stevinstichting: 'Antwerpen, Nationaal

main points of interest to come out of these works are not concerned with their role in strategy and the subsequent influence on the army, but rather the relationship between the authorities and the populations of the respective towns who fought over the rights of the land and the compensation to be paid in order to offset the inconvenience. Other histories of the Belgian army, and particularly the First World War, have also made mention of Belgium's fortifications, but only with regard to the structural weaknesses exposed by German heavy artillery in 1914.³⁶ By and large the general consensus appears to be that for all the faith put into their defensive system of fixed positions, the army was not strong enough to complement them and as such it must be seen as a failure of military policy.

As previously stated, the First World War has been well documented by Belgian historians, though not without some nationalist overtones. Some have even gone as far as to say that the delay caused by the Belgian forces at Liège in August 1914 caused the Schlieffen plan to be thrown so out of kilter as to have altered the course of the war in the Allies' favour.³⁷ Added to this, Tasnier and Van Overstraeten suggest that every hour counted in Belgium's defence of Antwerp which helped redress the balance of forces on the Marne and ensured that Dunkirk, Calais and Cherbourg remained in Allied hands.³⁸ Reading much of the immediate post-war literature would have one believe that the Belgian army was both glorious in retreat and in victory, encountering few, if any problems. The effect of *Flamenpolitik* on the army was a particularly glaring omission in most survey works. Henri Pirenne has discussed the somewhat limited

Reduit van Belgie (1859-1914)', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 29, no. 7 (1992), pp. 465-488 & vol. 29, no. 8 (1992) pp. 537-560.

³⁶ L. De Vos, *La Première Guerre Mondiale* (J.M. Collet, Braine-l'Alleud, 1997), p. 30.

³⁷ Terlinden, *Histoire Militaire*, p. 332

³⁸ M. Tasnier & R. Van Overstraeten, *L'Armée belge dans la Guerre Mondiale* (H. Bertels, Brussels, 1931), p. 170.

effects of the separatist movement on the occupied civilian population but, generally speaking, the topic appeared to be somewhat of a taboo.³⁹

More recent studies have acknowledged the effects of social, linguistic and political divisions within the army, particularly regarding the maintenance of discipline and morale. While the likes of Siegfried Debaeke and Jacques Maes have attempted to show the army as particularly heavy handed – particularly towards its Flemish soldiers – Sophie De Schaepdrijver, Stanislas Horvat and Tom Simoens have countered this assertion and argued that comparatively Belgian discipline was well-maintained.⁴⁰ Indeed, it has been shown that with regard to the March 1918 strikes, *Flamingantism* – in the derogatory sense of Flemish separatism – was not the primary motivating factor, rather a combination of war-weariness and a quest for linguistic parity contributed to a breakdown in officer-man relations.

More specialised works concerning the regional breakdown of Belgian casualties, however, have unearthed a related historiographical debate. In 1917, the *Flamenpolitik*-inspired Flemish journalist, Raf Verhulst, published figures from the monthly casualty lists that suggested 80% of fatalities were sustained by troops of Flemish origin. The idea behind it was to create unrest in Flanders and increase support for the German-supported separatist movement by demonstrating that Flemish soldiers

³⁹ H. Pirenne, *La Belgique et la Guerre Mondiale* (Les presses universitaires de France, Paris, 1928).

⁴⁰ S. Debaeke, *De Dood met de Kogel: Elf arme drommels ten onrechte gefusilleerd?* (De Klaproos, Bruges, 2008); J. Maes, 'Het Belgisch Militair Gerecht tijdens de Eerste wereldoorlog. Een portret van de geëxecuteerden', *Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps Présent*, no. 16 (2005), pp. 197-236; S. De Schaepdrijver, *De Groote Oorlog* (Atlas, Amsterdam & Antwerp, 1997); S. Horvat, *De Vervolging van Militairrechtelijke Delicten Tijdens Wereldoorlog I: De werking van het Belgisch krijgsgerecht* (Vubpress, Brussels, 2011); and T. Simoens, 'Belgian Military Justice in the First World War: A Difficult Expansion', in M. De Koster et al. (eds.), *Justice in Wartime and Revolutions: Europe, 1795-1950/Justice en temps de guerre et révolutions: Europe, 1795-1950* (Algemeen Rijksarchief, Brussels, 2012), pp. 183-202.

were doing more for the war-effort than their Walloon counterparts and being sacrificed in the process. With no official post-war inquiry into this, despite strong Flemish led movements that saw the introduction of language equality laws, the 80% myth remained ingrained in public consciousness. By the mid-1970s, however, two authors had attempted to question its validity.

The first of these was F.E. Stevens whose article about the 9th Infantry Regiment suggested that the ratio between Flemish and Walloon casualties was approximately equal and that, as such, the entirety of the population contributed to the struggle.⁴¹ However, this must be qualified to an extent, as his figures demonstrate that 53.28% were Flemish, 30.66% were Walloon, and 16.06% were of uncertain origin (most probably from the bilingual Brussels region). This rather large margin of uncertainty is unsatisfactory, as is the methodology behind his figures. Using regimental registers, which Stevens himself admits are unreliable, place of birth is used as the determining factor of regional origin, though Brussels is curiously set aside as a distinct entity creating this vacuum of unknowns. Equally, families of mixed origin and Flemish families embedded in Wallonia and vice versa are simply miscategorised for ease of use. The most galling of all inaccuracies, however, is that such general conclusions are derived from such a narrow and specific sample as a single regiment whose recruiting base was in the bilingual capital.

Indeed, in 1978 Luc Schepens published figures in the *Standaard* that completely contradicted Stevens' reappraisal of the 80% myth. Using an entirely different approach of measuring the regional breakdown of casualties by examining the death registers of ten Belgian cemeteries, Schepens comes to the conclusion that 67.9%

⁴¹ F.E. Stevens, 'De Samenstelling van het 9de Linierement tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog (1914-1918)', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 21, no. 7, (1976), pp. 681-722.

were of Flemish origin. Although this still disproves the 80% figure, it is still a politically controversial statement to make, as it would suggest that Flanders was forced to spill more blood in the fight for continued independence than Wallonia. However, as H. Keymuelen and L. De Vos point out in their series of articles on the issue in the late 1980s, the methodology behind these figures is possibly even more flawed than Stevens'.⁴² The cemeteries selected were all in Flanders and contained bodies of those men who had only fought on the stabilised Yser front from 1915-1918. This not only failed to take into account those men who had died in the early phases of the war whilst the fighting was in Wallonia (the Meuse), but equally ignored the fact that many Walloon corpses were exhumed and reinterred in their own localities after the war. Added to this, the fact that the Yser army was largely reinforced by Flemish recruits from the only unoccupied sliver of territory left, meant that the army was, during this phase of the war, a significantly more Flemish-dominated institution. Schepens' sample and results appear equally skewed and, as such, remain unconvincing.

Keymeulen and De Vos, in their rejection of the aforementioned works, set about in their series of articles to be more comprehensive in their research in an attempt to put an end to the debate. Using a much larger sample base (some 33,180, which translates to the 94% of Belgian casualties attributable to specific years of the war), they were able to include a larger spectrum of the army and war into their study.⁴³ Culling information from a number of sources for the names of those soldiers found in

⁴² H. Keymuelen & L. De Vos, 'Een Definitieve Afrekening met de 80% - Mythe? Het Belgische Leger (1914 – 1918) en de Sociale Numerieke Taalverhoudingen onder de Gesneuvelden van Lagere Rang', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 27, no. 8, (1988), pp. 589-612; vol. 28, no. 1, (1989), pp. 1-37; & vol. 28, no. 2, (1989), pp. 81-104.

⁴³ They suggest that 63% of casualties were sustained in 1914 and 1918 during the war of movement, and 31% to the stalemate on the Yser. The other 6% could not be attributed to a given year and as such were excluded from their sample. *Ibid.*

the published fatality lists in the *Moniteur Belge*, the pair devised three tests with differing criteria against which to measure the 80% figure. The first included their entire sample over the entirety of the war without taking into account place of death: this gave a result of 64.31% Flemish casualties. The second solely included casualties from the fighting army who died in Belgium, France or Britain and offered up the figure of 54.9%. The third, which only used the Army of the Yser and 1915-1918 campaign as its sample, concluded that 68.81% were Flemish. What this seems to demonstrate is the relative regional equality in the casualties of the Belgian army's fighting arms over the course of the war, but a much higher proportion of Flemish deaths during the fighting after the majority of the country was under German occupation. This was due to the almost exclusively Flemish intake of new recruits after 1915 from the unoccupied section of territory. Indeed, when looking exclusively at the mortality rates of the 1914-1918 classes of recruits, a staggering 72.07% were shown to originate from Flanders, reinforcing the point of a Flemishisation of the army during the war itself. Despite all this, and even reducing the sample to cover what was known to be a Flemish-dominated army, Keymeulen and De Vos can safely say that the 80% figure was indeed a myth, and that over the course of the war both sides of the population contributed to the nation's cause.

In terms of Anglophone historiography concerning the Belgian army directly, one would be forgiven for thinking that it did not exist prior to 1914. Of the few historians who have attempted to offer an insight into the nineteenth century institution, none can truly be said to have produced a definitive account of it. Indeed, the closest and most complete work is that of Jonathan E. Helmreich, whose diplomatic history of

Belgium does concern itself intermittently with the country's armed forces.⁴⁴ With such a broad topic at his disposal, Helmreich was able to broach certain social, economic, cultural and, naturally, diplomatic conditions that affected the army, which perhaps the likes of Gooch did not. *Armies in Europe*, clearly had a different purpose and as such could not afford to devote the time and space to the small, particular case of Belgium at the expense of the major European powers. A mere two paragraphs are the sum total of the analysis. Nonetheless, some interesting points are raised, regarding politics and regionalism, particularly when concerned with the conscription debate, which dominated the Belgian political agenda from 1870 until its adoption in 1913. For instance, reference is made to the succession of Catholic governments who blocked conscription for fear that Flemish youths would be corrupted by mixing with the socialist Walloons.⁴⁵ David Stevenson's article on Belgian pre-war preparation also tackles this very issue in the context of the army's 1913 reorganisation.⁴⁶ Despite adding some extra detail to Gooch's rather limited examination of the Belgian army's recruiting difficulties, it must be said that much of the Belgian army's pre-war history remains largely unknown to British readers. This deficit in knowledge is partly a result of a language barrier, but also perhaps a result of Belgium's situation as a neutral, which kept its army out of continental conflicts – and as such, consciousness – until it was thrust into the limelight in August 1914.

Studies of the First World War in British historiography, though largely overviews or examinations of the major belligerents, do take a noticeably greater interest in Belgium and its army. Politics and regionalism suddenly become more

⁴⁴ J.E. Helmreich, *Belgium and Europe: A Study in Small Power Diplomacy* (Mouton De Gruyter, The Hague, 1976).

⁴⁵ Gooch, *Armies in Europe*, p. 127.

⁴⁶ D. Stevenson, 'Battlefield or Barrier? Rearmament and Military Planning in Belgium, 1902-1914', *The International History Review*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2007), pp. 473-507.

important factors, as their effects are wider reaching and impact directly on the course of the war. Indeed, the Flemish question is taken up by the likes of David Englander in his work on discipline and morale. He notes that a series of ‘strikes’ and increased rates of desertion in the Belgian army on the Yser in 1917 and 1918 were a result of social, cultural and material deprivations experienced by the majority-Flemish speaking rank and file in the predominantly francophone dominated state and armed forces.⁴⁷ What he neglects, as a result of his work not being exclusively concerned with the Belgians, is the effect of *Flamenpolitik* on Flemish soldiers. Ian Beckett, on the other hand, does touch upon the German-inspired Flemish independence movement in occupied Belgium, and discusses the importance of propaganda in the sustenance of a national identity.⁴⁸ In the context of the First World War, the consequences of such serious issues to Belgium’s allies, gives added value to their study.

Among the other key themes highlighted by historians in their appraisal of Belgium during the First World War is the army’s wartime performance. Inherent in this is a study of the major campaigns in which it fought and, as such, the co-operation afforded to its allies. This latter point is of particular interest due to the unique situation whereby the Belgian constitution dictated that the monarch assumed control of the army as its active Commander in Chief during war. The dichotomy, which emanated from his dual role as civilian figurehead on the one hand, and military leader on the other, is central to understanding King Albert’s direction of the war and his relationship with the British and French. Unfortunately, British historiography has largely by-passed this in its haste to explore the strained relationship over contradicting strategy with Joffre.

⁴⁷ D. Englander, ‘Mutinies and Military Morale’, in H. Strachan (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998), p. 194.

⁴⁸ I.F.W. Beckett, *The Great War 1914 – 1918* (Pearson, Harlow, 2001), pp. 138 & 285.

As both William Philpott and Hew Strachan demonstrate, the tension arose from differing priorities. For King Albert, the defence of Belgian territory was paramount, whilst the French general, under the impression that his allies had little military value, believed that the Belgians ought to have voluntarily become an adjunct to his conception of a grand allied strategy orchestrated by himself.⁴⁹ Indeed, communication often broke down entirely between the two armies with each expecting the other to fall into line with their respective designs. As a result, the Belgian army found itself fighting alone against a superior force, which seriously crippled its fighting capabilities for the rest of the war, leading to its uncompromising defensive attitude. Though often described as valiant and brave, the over-riding perception among British historians regarding the Belgian army's military performance was that it was poor. Even Strachan's comment that the army 'acquitted itself with much more distinction [...] than it had a right to expect' is tinged with a note of acknowledged failure.⁵⁰

In carrying out this study, a variety of sources have been consulted in archives across Belgium, France and the United Kingdom. Additionally, a number of databases have been assembled in order to carry out work on the composition of the officer corps, the rank and file, and the auxiliary forces. The officers' consists of 2,375 entries spread across five regiments at ten-year intervals, with data extracted from the matriculation sheets held at the Musée Royal de l'Armée (MRA), Brussels. These included the 2nd *Chasseurs à Pied*, 12th Line Infantry Regiment, 1st Lancers, 4th Artillery Regiment, and

⁴⁹ W. Philpott, *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1996), p. 20; W. Philpott, 'Britain, France and the Belgian Army', in B. Bond (et.al.) (ed.), *'Look to Your Front': Studies in the First World War by the British Commission for Military History* (Sepplmount, Staplehurst, 1999), pp. 121-136; and H. Strachan, *The First World War: Vol I To Arms* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001), p. 216.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

the Regiment of Engineers. The selection was based on the premise of providing as wide-ranging a sample possible across all arms, whilst also ensuring the representation of Revolutionary remnants that were formally incorporated into the former in 1832. These were used in conjunction with demographic data taken from the Ministry of the Interior's *Statistique de la Belgique: Population Recensement Général* and *Statistique Générale de la Belgique: Exposé de la Situation du Royaume* from 1846 to 1910 in order to draw further figures and conclusions for both the officer corps and the rank and file. The Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, held at the Archives du Royaume Général, furnished an enrolment list of approximately 1,000 Civic Guardsmen that was used in analysing the age and social composition of this corps. Another 150 entries were added from records found in the Algemeen Rijksarchief Kortrijk and the MRA. For the officer corps of both the Civic Guard and Gendarmerie, data was computed from the biographical details published Luc Keuning's work on the forces of order in Brussels.⁵¹

This thesis has been undertaken using the 'army and society' approach that has extensively revised the study of military history in recent decades. Notable examples by the likes of Ian Beckett, David French, Edward Spiers, John Gooch, Douglas Porch, Hew Strachan and more recently Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly have provided a structural framework to follow.⁵² Thus, the work has been divided in six chapters, discussing a number of interrelated themes to form an appreciation of the Belgian army as an institution, and its role as a tool of nation building.

⁵¹ L. Keunings, *Les forces de l'ordre à Bruxelles au XIXe siècle: Données biographiques* (Ville de Bruxelles, Brussels, 2007), pp. 107-168 & 186-246.

⁵² For examples of this see Beckett, *Riflemen Form*; French, *Military Identities*; Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army*; Gooch, *Armies in Europe* and *Army State and Society in Italy*; Strachan, *European Armies*; and Bowman & Connelly, *The Edwardian Army* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012).

Chapter one discusses the professionalisation of the officer corps from its establishment in 1830 until the outbreak of the First World War. This process was affected by a number of external factors, including a large influx of foreign officers, political interference, and institutional failings that all contributed towards undermining efficiency and morale. Obstacles for Flemish-speakers, in a predominantly Francophone officer corps, resulted in an alteration of the linguistic profile towards bilingualism that reflected the trend among Flanders' middle class society. This was reinforced by the army's educational institutions, the *École Militaire* and *École de Guerre*, which sought to produce an homogenous group of officers through a standardised curriculum taught in French. While the influence of these establishments became increasingly prominent, the military values and professionalism they inculcated eroded over time as slow promotion rates in a neutral army forced many ambitious officers to seek alternative careers. Thus, by 1914, the officer corps lacked the martial spirit and identity it had fought to create since the Revolution.

The second chapter analyses the politics behind the recruitment of the rank and file, and its attempts to act as a unifying force among a divided population. In spite of national recruitment and a form of conscription through the ballot, a deep-rooted anti-militarism within society coupled with the injustices of replacement actually drove the army and society further apart. The power of local interests and of the electorate can clearly be seen to hold successive governments (both Catholic and Liberals) to account over the extension of military service; much to the detriment of military efficiency. This was to be a recurring theme until a series of reforms between 1902 and 1913 saw the system altered to include periods of volunteerism (1902), partial conscription (1909) and full, general service (1913). These changes occurred too late to have an impact on the army's capabilities, and demonstrated the damaging effects of regionalism on

military affairs through politics, that undermined any attempts to forge a shared national identity.

Parochialisms were to be supplanted by national ideals whilst under arms in the ‘school of the nation’, a discussion of which forms the basis of chapter three. However, the army neglected its task of providing physical, moral and educational supports for the youth of the nation entrusted to its care. This was seen to be the corollary of military service, eventually leading to greater rights as citizens, but the army and State defaulted on its side of the unwritten social contract. Deplorable conditions, religious and linguistic discrimination did nothing to endear the idea of nationhood to the majority of recruits forced into military service. As the majority of soldiers hailed from the pious, rural heartlands of Flanders, the seemingly unjust institution, which propagated the use of corporal punishment, further alienated the increasingly anti-militaristic society. It explains the reasons why the Catholic Party, with its electoral base in these regions, came to dominate politics in the latter nineteenth century with policies specifically aimed at reducing the military charge.

Chapter four examines the changing nature of bourgeois militarism in the auxiliary forces between 1830 and 1914. The exclusivity of the Civic Guard, the theoretical guardians of the Revolution, engaged the middle-classes in the military establishment that they had so tirelessly sought to avoid. With the exception of the threat posed to their position in 1848, participation was marred with a similar apathy that initiated its decline. By the time internal order was threatened by the rise of socialism in the 1880s, and for the battle to extend the franchise in the 1900s, the composition of the Civic Guard had been reduced to urban centres, with the effect of undermining its military efficiency and its political reliability. Shared Liberal values and anti-clerical sentiment among the urban *bourgeoisie* undermined the force’s ability

to be used effectively as an aid to the civil power or as a military auxiliary. This role was subsequently adopted by the Gendarmerie, whose professionalism, apolitical nature, and military performance in policing internal unrest saw it usurp the Civic Guard as the primary State bulwark against the International.

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

The final chapter examines how the issues in the previous five chapters played out in a wartime context. Operationally, the First World War exposed many of the organisational failings of Belgium's nineteenth century military system that had taken too long to reform. Nevertheless, the stoic defence of the Meuse, Antwerp and the Yser

in 1914 demonstrated a unity of action among its divided composite parts that revealed something akin to nationalism. Parallel concepts of what it meant to be Belgian emerged that allowed an under-resourced and badly beaten army to endure the travails of a war that not only overran their hearths and homes, but also threatened the nation's continued independence. This was exemplified in the March 1918 strikes by Flemish soldiers, in which they campaigned for linguistic parity within the concept of a wider Belgian nation. Rather than mutiny, they continued to soldier to rid the country of 'the other' against which they, and the rest of the army, came to define themselves, demonstrating that the crisis of 1914-18 allowed concurrent affiliations to the concept of nationhood to flourish that were otherwise stifled in peacetime.

The Officer Corps

During the formative years of the Belgian Army, the creation of a homogenous body of men reflecting the values of, and with the capabilities to defend, the newly formed nation-state was of paramount importance. The 10 Days Campaign (2nd -12th August 1831) against William I and his Dutch forces, from whom they had gained independence only a year previously, had demonstrated Belgium's precarious situation. The officer corps, as an embodiment of new social ideals, and a haven of early nineteenth century European liberalism, was to become the home of what Josephine Hoegaerts terms 'the fathers' of the nation.⁵³ A military culture of professionalism was sought by King Leopold I upon accession to his new throne in an attempt to preserve what the Revolutionaries of 1830 had won. An influx of largely French, and a smattering of Polish officers, who had lost their own battle for liberalism and independence against the Russians, helped solidify the army in its transitional period from an assortment of revolutionary bands into an organised and disciplined force. This included the establishment of the *École Militaire* in 1834, which was modelled on St Cyr to better instruct aspiring Belgian officers who took over from the foreigners who gradually became naturalised or returned to their native countries.

As the shadow of imposed neutrality lengthened and peacetime soldiering became the seemingly endless norm after 1839, the officer corps needed a stimulus to sustain its early attempts at professionalism. Some officers obtained experience in foreign armies, though the majority were either not afforded the opportunity, or chose not to take it. Others merely lapsed into despair as the drudgery of garrison life matured

⁵³ J. Hoegaerts, 'Benevolent Fathers and Virile Brothers: Metaphors of Kinship and Age in the Nineteenth-Century Belgian Army', *Low Countries Historical Review*, vol. 127, no. 1 (2012), p. 84.

into a simmering discontent. Promotion rates slowed significantly, inducing many officers to 'sell-out' to the commercial opportunities in the Congo during the 1880s and 1890s. The duel, outlawed in 1841, became one of the few traditions, which perpetuated a fast declining sense of military *esprit de corps*, separating soldiers from civilian life. The lack of efficiently enforced repressive measures outraged large sections of society who began to throw increasingly heavy criticism in the army's direction as it moved into the twentieth century. Unpopular initiatives such as the prospective introduction of conscription only galvanised regional tensions fought out in linguistic and political terms. The army, its officer corps included, became somewhat of a crucible for many of the nation's social problems, meaning that the early confidence in professionalisation was, by the eve of the First World War, replaced with a mixture of disgust, fear and anxiety of what the future may hold.

In 1831, the Provisional Government decided to recreate the Dutch '*Afdelingen*' – regiments – that had been recruited in Belgium, and called on all Belgian officers to return 'home' to command them. A promise of increased rank saw 402 return from Dutch service and a further twenty-one from abroad by 1834. They were supported by some 1,088 volunteer officers elected during the Revolution and 1,107 men promoted from the ranks since 1830.⁵⁴ As a body it lacked experience, as even many returning from Dutch service were only junior officers, creating a void at the top of the command structure. This was a result of a calculated Dutch policy which limited the number of Belgians from attaining positions of influence within the army. The Military School at Breda only allocated three or four places per hundred annually to Belgian officers. This led to a particular shortage of trained, knowledgeable officers in the technical arms as

⁵⁴ *Moniteur Belge*, 25 December 1834.

well as the cavalry. Indeed, such policies meant that only a little over ten per cent of artillery officers were of Belgian origin.⁵⁵

With the threat of war still looming large, the King was authorised to counteract this lack of experience by commissioning as many foreign officers into the army as he deemed fit, for the duration of the war. The results of this initiative are clear to see. In 1835 only 70.1% of the army's officer corps was of Belgian origin.⁵⁶ Yet, it was not the cavalry that boasted the greatest number of foreigners, but the infantry (17.2% compared to 32.9%). In large part, this was due to the 58 French officers found in the infantry, many of whom had been detached from the Army of the North that had helped rid Belgium of Dutch presence. In total, this avenue of expertise furnished some 49 of the 77 French officers serving in 1835.⁵⁷ Additionally, the number of foreign officers entering the army, and particularly the infantry, came through the Revolution's volunteer corps. These ad hoc forces numbered many foreigners among their ranks, particularly in the foreign-raised units such as the London and Paris Legions. Whereas the infantry comprised of 66.3% of volunteers, the cavalry counted a mere 9.1%. Seeing as these corps were mostly foot units and later amalgamated to form the basis of the

⁵⁵ C. Merzbach, 'Les Officiers Polonais dans l'Armée Belge après 1830', *Le Flambeau* (1931), p. 1.

⁵⁶ All figures quoted, unless otherwise stated, come from the author's own database compiled from information on the Matriculation Sheets of officers from two infantry, one cavalry, one artillery and one engineer regiment taken at ten year intervals starting in 1835. The regiments used were the 2nd Chasseurs à Pied; 12th Line Regiment, 1st Lancers; 4th Regiment of Artillery, and the Regiment of Engineers. Due to the fact that the artillery and engineers were not organised into individual regiments as early as 1835, figures for this arm only begin in 1845. These documents are held at the Musée Royal de l'Armée (MRA) and included boxes 1-52. Belgian is taken to mean anyone born in Belgium to Belgian parents (including the ceded parts of Limburg and Luxembourg for 1835 figures), or abroad to Belgian parents. Naturalised Belgians or those born in Belgium to foreign parents are not considered intrinsically nationals for the purposes of this study.

⁵⁷ J.R. Leconte, *La Formation Historique de l'Armée Belge: les Officiers Étrangers au service de la Belgique (1830-1853)* (Imprimerie des papeteries de Genval, Paris & Brussels, 1949), pp. 146-147.

Chasseurs à Pied regiments, with their officers allowed to retain their rank and station within them, the above average proportion of non-nationals in the infantry is not wholly surprising. By 1845, however, the army had begun to stabilise and the proportion of Belgian officers had jumped from 70.2% in 1835 to 83.9%. Over time, the officer corps continued to discard its foreigners to the point where by 1905 it was comprised of 96.8% Belgians.

Whilst large numbers of French officers filled the gaps in the infantry's cadres, a number of high-profile Poles were entrusted with the reorganisation of the cavalry and artillery. Generals Ignacy Marcei Kruszewski and Prot Feliks Prószynski were two such figures, both of which had fought for Poland's own independence against the Tsar during the winter of 1830-1831. Due largely to these men, some forty-eight other Polish officers were recommended and accepted into Belgian service between 1832 and 1839. Part of their desire to travel across Europe to take up service in a foreign army was their belief that Belgium was fighting for a similar cause against the Dutch as they were against the Russians. Their own uprising coincided with the Tsar's intentions to march to Holland's aid against the Belgian revolutionaries, which, had they been forced to participate, would have been tantamount to 'political and moral suicide.'⁵⁸ This, they managed to avoid despite losing their own bid for independence. However, it did not mean defeat of the liberal ideals for which they were fighting. In Belgium they found a nation built on the very principles the Poles cherished so dearly, empowering them with a renewed vigour to fight for their cause, albeit on a different battlefield. Major Armande von Brochowski expressed his motivation for joining the Belgian army in the following terms:

⁵⁸ J. Lukaszewski, 'Les révolutions belge et polonaise (1830-1831)', in I. Goddeeris & P. Lierneux (eds.), *1830 Insurrection polonaise – Indépendance belge*, p. 33. For more on the Polish links to the Belgian revolution, see other chapters in this volume.

what could our goal have been, in taking to foreign service, if not to aid a struggle that might broaden, conquer or die if need be, in the hope that one day, other happier brothers than us, would be able to revisit the sacred homes of the nation; it was changing location without changing flag nor dreams.⁵⁹

Prószynski implored the Minister of War to accept him and his fellow officers' humble request to join the Belgian army.⁶⁰ They had begun to come under pressure whilst staying in Paris to move across the border as the French authorities attempted to placate Russian discontent at the apparent aid being afforded them. The Belgians readily accepted, despite concerns surrounding the growing number of revolutionaries beginning to congregate in Brussels. Their incorporation demonstrates how, whether by chance or design, the Belgian army became a refuge for foreign liberals.

Despite being a nation founded on liberal principles, many Belgian officers were less than welcoming towards their Polish comrades.⁶¹ Indeed, the harmonisation of national against personal interest proved to be a difficult balancing act as many officers felt that they were being denied their rightful opportunities as a result of preferential treatment towards non-nationals. This resulted in a series of discriminatory actions directed against foreign officers, French and Polish alike. Von Brochowski, for example, was convinced that his stagnation in the army was a result of harmful rumours spread by his fellow officers following his decision to serve in Spain in 1837.⁶² Equally, other Poles were known to have had heated disagreements with Belgian officers over

⁵⁹ MRA Officer File Von Brochowski 2596/67, Memorandum to King Leopold I, 1846.

⁶⁰ MRA Officer File Prószynski 2545/8, Letter to Minister of War from Polish Officers in France, May 1832.

⁶¹ For further reading regarding the forging of the Belgian nation-state on socio-political ideologies such as Liberalism see, E. Witte, *Construction de la Belgique*, pp. 112-114.

⁶² MRA, Von Brochowski. Letter dated 28 February 1847.

relatively petty issues, such as accusations of dishonourable pasts or the unlawful sale of horses.⁶³ Two of the more high-profile cases, however, concerned Prószyński and Kruszewski themselves. The former found himself being undermined and humiliated at every opportunity whilst working as a staff officer in the 3rd Division under General l'Olivier, prompting him to judge his position untenable and requesting an immediate transfer.⁶⁴ Similarly, Kruszewski was the subject of ill feeling when poised to take command of the 2nd *Chasseurs à Cheval* in 1832, following the decision to abandon the idea of a Polish Legion and disperse the officers among the various Belgian units. Many officers in the regiment were known to be openly hostile to the prospect of serving under a foreigner and stated that they would hound him from the regiment.⁶⁵

Additionally, issues regarding seniority, ranks and pensions only added to the difficulties faced by the contingent of Polish officers. Many left the service upon the signing of peace with Holland in 1839, seeking further active service in pursuit of their ultimate goal rather than resigning themselves to the monotony of barrack life. Those who remained were given a two-year extension to their terms of service in which time they could decide to become naturalised Belgian citizens. By 1842 *l'Indépendance Belge* reported that fourteen Polish officers had been, or were in the process of being, naturalised.⁶⁶ However, diplomatic tensions between Belgium and Russia over this issue dictated that all naturalised Poles remaining in Belgian service were to be pensioned-off a decade later. Despite a hard-fought case to be allowed to remain in the army, led by von Brochowski, a law passed on 13 March 1853 terminated their

⁶³ MRA Officer File Gordaszewski 3999/13, Proposition of Corps Transfer, September 1841; and MRA Officer File Grabowski 2587, Letter to Minister of War, 5 May 1837 & Letter to Commandant of the Brigade of Cuirassiers, 28 July 1837.

⁶⁴ MRA, Prószyński 2545/20, Prószyński to Minister of War, March 1841.

⁶⁵ MRA Officer File Kruszewski 2586/10, Inquiry concerning the placement of Kruszewski in the 2nd *Chasseurs à Cheval*. Hostility of Officers, 11 May 1832.

⁶⁶ *l'Indépendance Belge*, 6 June 1842.

engagements. Annual pensions of between 1,800 francs and 4,125 francs were awarded to thirteen officers based on rank and length of service.⁶⁷ This act saw Russia finally recognise Belgian independence and agree to establish communications through respective legations. Nevertheless, a veritable Polish military tradition within the Belgian Army had been established, as a number of sons of naturalised officers would later obtain commissions as nationalised Belgians.⁶⁸

Criticism of French influence in the army was equally as prevalent but much more firmly rooted in the scepticism behind their motives. Although Holland was the immediate enemy, and the French had supported Belgium's independence movement with the deployment of considerable forces, it was no secret that France had always coveted the region since they had ceded it in 1814. Indeed, despite channelling part of their discontent towards French officers in general - so much so that they were advised to exchange their own uniforms for Belgian ones – many Belgian officers targeted the senior officers whom they believed were ideally placed to pursue a pro-French agenda.⁶⁹ General Louis Evain, who held the portfolio of Minister of War from 1832 to 1836, and General Jean Chapelié who established the *École Militaire* in 1834 through which successive generations of future Belgian officers would be instructed, were two such cases. The general feeling was summed up by *Le Messager de Gand* when it attacked the Minister of War's admission criteria for the *École Militaire* in 1835; 'This is how, little by little, the French emissaries are exploiting the Belgian nation for its own profit, moulding it for Louis-Philippe's use.'⁷⁰ Opponents in the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 5 April 1853.

⁶⁸ T. Panecki, 'Les Officiers Polonais dans l'Armée Belge 1839 – 1853', in Goddeeris & Lierneux (eds.), *1830 Insurrection polonaise – Indépendance belge* (Academia-Bruylant, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2001) p. 94.

⁶⁹ Leconte, *Officiers Étrangers*, pp. 98 & 152-153.

⁷⁰ *Le Messager de Gand*, 20 April 1835.

press were similarly found in the Chamber. The Liberal Joseph Lebeau, later Prime Minister from 1840-1841, attempted to replace Evain with Gérard Buzen but was thwarted by Royal intervention. This led to Lebeau's resignation along with those of many of his colleagues. However, the discontented Belgians soon got their wish, as many French officers returned home following the peace of 1839. Only a handful, including Evain and Chapelié, became naturalised and remained in the service. This mass departure, albeit after the general reorganisation of the army had been largely completed, left the officer corps relatively short of experience once again; something requiring different means to remedy.

One way in which this was done was by allowing periods of extended leave to a certain number of officers to either be detached to a foreign army on campaign, or to take part in one of the Belgian overseas expeditions undertaken at various intervals during the nineteenth century. The law did not permit Belgians to serve in other armies without the penalty of losing nationality, but it did provide leeway in the shape of allowing officers to serve on 'missions and special services' whilst still technically remaining on the establishment. This ensured that officers on 'mission' would neither lose their rank nor seniority. Through this loophole, and whilst carefully balancing the mantle of a perpetually neutral state which did not have the right to directly intervene in conflicts, a number of officers saw service in Portugal, Spain, and Algeria to name but a few in the twenty-year period following independence.

The Algerian experience was granted to twenty-four Belgian officers detached to the French Army between 1840 and 1851. These officers, although sent to learn the art of campaigning at close quarters, were often charged with a dual mission of also assessing the suitability for the eventual establishment of a Belgian commercial coastal

enclave to aid the national economy.⁷¹ Early reports back to Belgium contained information on the ‘mortal’ climate, tactics, supplies, and French brutalities to keep the local tribes in check.⁷² Many took part in action too, and with great distinction. The *Moniteur Belge* reported that the Duc D’Orleans said of them, ‘The Belgian officers have worthily represented their country. They were seen at the head of cavalry charges, leading the infantry attack up the Teniah hill, whilst also in advanced positions engaged in fire-fights and grappling with the Arabs.’⁷³ Even greater praise was attributed by General Dampierre when addressing the Belgian Major Lahure, ‘If I was permitted to remove my *Croix d’Honneur* and attach it to your breast, I would do it instantly as it could not be worn more worthily.’⁷⁴ The *Legion d’Honneur* was subsequently conferred upon four Belgian officers; Lahure, Vandervreken, Gillain and Nalinne. Upon their return to Belgium, it was not uncommon for these officers to be greeted with regimental banquets to celebrate their exploits but possibly also to revere the few men in the officer corps with recent campaigning experience.⁷⁵

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

⁷¹ *Moniteur Belge*, 18 July 1845. The idea was to send a number of starving Flemish families, following the famine which had hit the region hard, to be the first settlers; *La Vedette*, 30 April 1847. See also, J.R. Leconte, *Les Tentatives d’Expansion Coloniale sous le Regne de Léopold 1er* (V. Van Dieren & Co, Antwerp, 1946).

⁷² MRA, Fonds Belgische Militaire Aanwezigheid in het Buitenland (1826-1955), hereafter Belgian Military Abroad: Algeria IV/2-3, Memo on the Expedition to Medea. General Considerations on War in Africa, 25 June 1840; and IV/3, Report to Minister of War, 3 March 1841.

⁷³ *Moniteur Belge*, 3 June 1840.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2 August 1840.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 8 & 30 September 1840.

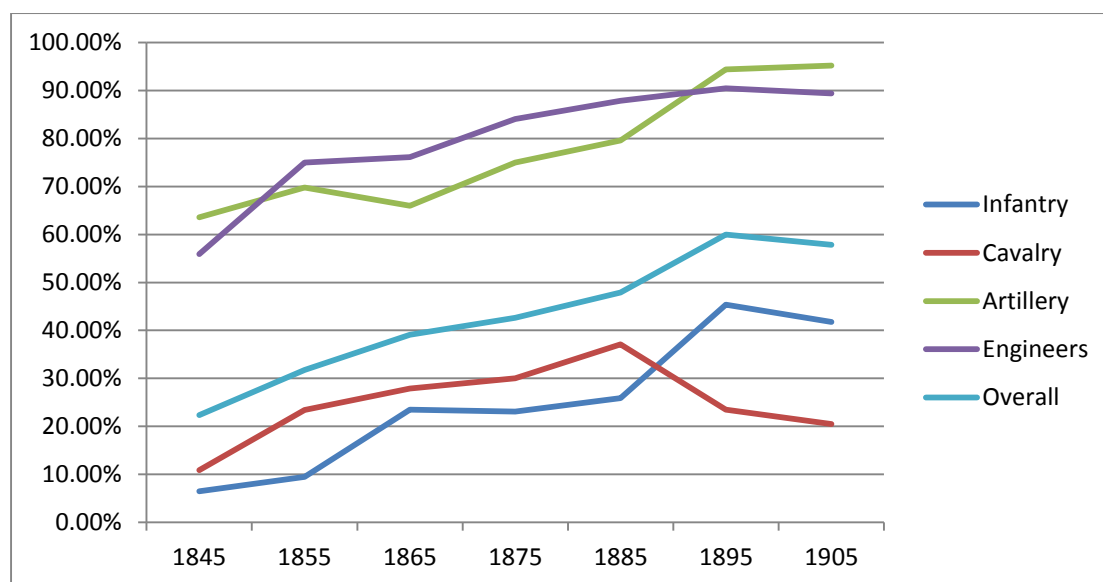
and staff officers, through a heavily scientific and mathematical based curriculum that mirrored courses given at the French institutions of St Cyr and Metz. Admission criteria included: 1) Be born or naturalised Belgians; 2) Aged between 16 and 20; 3) Speak French; 4) Have a general knowledge of history and geography and an intimate knowledge of Belgian history and geography; 5) Draw well enough to copy a figure's head; and 6) Have good handwriting. Once enrolled, students underwent two years of general study before specialising in one of the three branches offered; the brightest tending to opt for the General Staff. Notwithstanding its attempt at creating a professionalised corps of staff officers, the *École Militaire* only managed to produce an average of between two and three per year prior to the creation of the staff college (*École de Guerre*) in 1869.⁷⁶ The weakest students often passed straight into the infantry and cavalry, though a steady stream of officers to the less technical arms was not established until 1841. Attempts had been made in 1837 and 1838 to introduce infantry and cavalry specific courses, though mobilisation to face the Dutch threat had delayed its implementation. After running rather irregularly during the 1840s, these courses became more regular additions, which, in conjunction with the annual artillery, engineer and staff cohorts, formed a wider base of qualified officers to disperse throughout the army.

Indeed, if a study of the army's professionalization over the course of the nineteenth century is undertaken, the increasing importance of a military education becomes evident. From just 3.3% in 1835, the percentage of officers with *École*

⁷⁶ W. Simons (ed.), *L'Institut Royal Supérieur de Défense, une Longue et Magnifique Histoire 1830-1995* (Koninklijk Hoger Instituut voor Defensie. Defensie Studiecentrum, Brussels, 1995), pp. 20-21. For further reading regarding the *École Militaire* see V. Deguise, *Histoire de l'École Militaire de la Belgique* (Polleunis et Ceuterick, Brussels, 1895); and *Histoire de l'École Militaire 1834 – 1934* (Brussels, 1935).

Militaire qualifications, or foreign equivalent, rose to 39.1% by 1865. Following the expansion of military education facilities to include the *École de Guerre*, these figures soared to 60% by 1895.⁷⁷ A significant jump between 1885 and 1895 can be explained in terms of a ‘changing of the guard’ within the officer corps, where many officers whose careers had begun in the 1840s and 1850s, largely without a military education, were replaced at the top by the cohorts of *École Militaire* graduates. These men were being joined by increasing numbers of sub-lieutenants passing through the establishments to create a far more homogenous group of officers by the start of the twentieth century. This was particularly the case for the artillery and the engineers, in which professional training became almost a pre-requisite to a commission. This can be seen when comparing the army’s overall percentage of men with military educations to those of the technical arms alone (see Figure 1.1). By 1905, 95.2% of artillery

Figure 1.1. Percentage of officers with a military education 1845-1905.



⁷⁷ Database figures. It is worth noting, however, that the opening of the *École de Guerre* in 1869 had only a minimal effect on the increase in the figures beyond this date, as very few officers went solely through this institution. The majority had already qualified from the *École Militaire*, and as such, were only counted once in the data collection.

officers and 89.4% of engineer officers had passed through Belgium's academies. By contrast, the infantry and cavalry constantly struggled to keep up with the overall average, largely disproving Guy Van Gorp's assertion that officers emanating from the *École Militaire* showed strong preferences to join these arms between 1855 and 1924.⁷⁸

The proportion of officers who joined the artillery is hardly surprising, when it is remembered that mathematics formed the basis of the entrance examinations through which applicants were admitted. Indeed, the weighting of the various subjects tested demonstrates the need for candidates to already have a sound knowledge of arithmetic, algebra, geometry and trigonometry in order to follow the scientific nature of the curriculum. Despite this, of the twenty-six students in the sixteenth Infantry and

Figure. 1.2. 1867 Entrance examination criteria for admission.⁷⁹

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Weighting</i>	<i>Pass Mark out of 20</i>
<i>Mathematics</i>	20	10*
<i>French</i>	10	8
<i>History and Geography</i>	4	5
<i>Latin</i>	6	5
<i>German</i>	5	5
<i>English</i>	4	6
<i>Flemish</i>	3	7
<i>Drawing</i>	1	-

⁷⁸ Guy Van Gorp: 'Le Recrutement et la Formation des Candidats Officier de Carrière à l'Armée Belge', (Ph.D. Thesis, Université Catholique de Louvain, 1969), pp. 47-48.

⁷⁹ MRA Fonds Moscou 818, Nerenburger to Goethals, 7 January 1867. * Taken as written and oral examinations and split into two sections: arithmetic and algebra, and geometry and trigonometry. Both required an average pass mark of ten which equated to five marks for each of the two sections.

Cavalry cohort (*promotion*) who asserted a desire to be admitted to the *section spéciale* to study and qualify for the artillery in their final year, only the top sixteen were deemed to have the ‘capacity, intelligence and knowledge’ to follow it.⁸⁰ This came only ten weeks after General Nerenburger, Commander of the *École Militaire*, had written to the Minister of War saying that this group of students would provide excellent officers for the army following an average examination mark of 13.81 out of twenty. This equated to one ‘very good’ student (obtaining the highest mark of 16.07), twenty-one ‘good’, and thirteen ‘good enough.’⁸¹ The sixteen students authorised to move onto the artillery and engineers course still represented some 45.7% of their cohort, a fair percentage considering that they had initially enrolled for the infantry and cavalry. This only increased as time went on and goes some of the way to explaining the reason why the artillery became so well represented with *École Militaire* graduates as the century wore on. Indeed, so competitive was it to join the artillery by 1891, that even students who had qualified for the artillery were told that there were not enough places available, and that they would have to take a post in a different branch of the service.⁸² This left the artillery in the enviable position by the turn of the century of being able to select the most accomplished cadets emanating from the *École Militaire*.

The *École de Guerre* similarly placed a heavy emphasis upon the scientific aspects of military education. A quick glance at the breakdown of subjects by number of lessons taught during a student’s first year in 1874 shows that 182 hours were devoted to the arts, and 298 to maths and science (See Figure. 1.3.). Naturally, the establishment of this course in 1869 saw the staff course at the *École Militaire* abandoned. From this point onwards, all staff officers would have to pass through the

⁸⁰ Ibid., Nerenburger to Goethals, 13 May 1867.

⁸¹ Ibid., Nerenburger to Goethals, 27 February 1867.

⁸² Ibid., De Tilly to Cousebandt d’Alkemade, 18 February 1891.

Figure. 1.3. Course for first year students at the *École de Guerre* in 1874.⁸³

<i>Arts</i>	<i>Number of Hours</i>	<i>Sciences</i>	<i>Number of Hours</i>
<i>Art of War</i>	32	<i>Artillery</i>	60
<i>Philosophy behind the study of History</i>	20	<i>Fortifications</i>	21
<i>History</i>	30	<i>Topography</i>	18
<i>French Literature</i>	20	<i>Horsemanship</i>	23
<i>Flemish Language</i>	30	<i>Chemistry/Physics</i>	70
<i>German Language</i>	30	<i>Mathematics</i>	66
<i>English Language</i>	20	<i>Astronomy</i>	20
-	-	<i>Geodesy</i>	20

École de Guerre, whose admission process was deemed far more in touch with current military affairs than its predecessor. The new specialised institution, in contrast to the *École Militaire*, only selected candidates who had already spent a minimum of three years with a regiment and had learnt the ropes of military life. Criticism had previously been levelled at the old system whereby officers were admitted to the staff course before they had spent any time in the army and would subsequently pass straight into the staff corps without any regimental experience. This, it was feared, had created a distant and detached group of officers at the head of the military establishment.

Indeed, the idea of exclusivity within the officer corps, and particularly those graduating from the military's educational institutions, became increasingly prevalent as the nineteenth century wore on. It was suggested that a military caste was in the

⁸³ MRA, Fonds Moscou 4113, *École de Guerre*, Programme of Lessons 1874.

process of detaching itself from civil society and the value of equality of opportunity that was so pivotal to the concept of Belgian nationality. This manifested itself in the debate surrounding the roles of the *École des Cadets* and the *Écoles des Pupilles*, Belgium's equivalent to the Duke of York's Royal Military School. The former, established in 1897 admitted children of officers with the sole purpose of preparing them for entrance to the *École Militaire*. The latter, formed in 1838, accepted children from families with any military or civil service background, and attempted to provide the army with trained NCOs. A number did manage to obtain commissions as officers, with some, such as Jean J.A. Wendelen, of the 12th Line Infantry Regiment, achieving notable success by rising to the rank of Lieutenant General, albeit with the aid of having passed through the *École Militaire* en route.⁸⁴ This difference in eligibility proved unpopular in the Chamber of Representatives, with many vocal critics condemning the *École des Cadets* as an 'anti-democratic' institution creating an isolated pool of officers from which the army would draw.⁸⁵ Indeed, the radical representative for Liège, Charles Magnette, proclaimed his disgust at the *cours centrale's* decision in 1897 to give precedence to sons with military backgrounds by stating, 'We are stopping the democratic recruitment of officers to the army. We are aiming, it would seem, to create a new caste, to hand over the golden epaulets hereditarily.'⁸⁶ A decade later, members were still claiming the same injustices, with one saying, 'I struggle to understand this distinction between castes in a democratic country such as Belgium, where the most modest of means ought to be able, through their own merit, to attain the highest

⁸⁴ For more information regarding the *École des Pupilles* under its various guises over the course of the 19th Century, see Y.P. Van Renthegem: *Enfants de Troupe, Pupilles, et Cadets de l'Armée de 1838 à 1945* (Musée Royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire Militaire/Koninklijk Museum Van Het Leger Van De Krijgsgeschiedenis, Brussels, 2000).

⁸⁵ Plenum.be Chamber of Representative Debates, 13 May 1897.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 14 May 1897.

positions available.⁸⁷ This would seem to infer two things. Firstly, that by the turn of the century, the officer corps was becoming an insular institution in its own right, formed around the military establishments and the practices and values taught within them. Secondly, that social barriers were preventing a number of talented men from working their way to the highest ranks of the army, which itself was becoming an increasingly detached enclave from society itself.

However, an examination of the military experience of the officer corps would suggest in fact, that the majority of officers had spent time in, and been promoted through, the ranks. As such, the argument put forward for exclusivity within the officer corps is somewhat tenuous, especially when it is considered that a number of NCOs were admitted alongside other candidates into the *École Militaire*. Clearly, the army was heavily laden with remnants of the Revolution during its formative years. Some 51.4% of officers in 1835 could lay claim to involvement as a volunteer or as an officer in one of the many *corps francs* of 1830, and 62% as rankers in a regular force. Meanwhile only 19.9% had previous experience as regular officers.⁸⁸ Therefore, the basis of the Belgian army's officer corps can be seen as being very inclusive. While the numbers of volunteers and men who had held commissions in other armies naturally fell away with the passing of time, the proportion of Belgian officers being promoted from the ranks remained remarkably high throughout the century. Indeed, in 1905, 58.7% of officers had come from the ranks, leaving only the remaining 41.3% as the so-called military caste that passed straight through the *École Militaire* without any previous experience.⁸⁹ The majority of this latter category hailed from the technical

⁸⁷ Ibid., 13 December 1907.

⁸⁸ Author's database. Note, some officers were counted in two or more categories if they had held different stations prior to their commission in the Belgian army.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

arms, too, leaving the infantry and cavalry heavily reliant on the ranks to fill their officer cadres.

There is scant information regarding the occupations of officers or their fathers in the available records, which makes an accurate social composition difficult to calculate. However, the figures produced by Kris Quanten point to dominance of the *bourgeoisie* (specifically the *petit bourgeoisie*) alongside men of lower social standing.⁹⁰ This corresponds with the consistently high number of promotions from the ranks that set the Belgian officer corps apart from most of its European contemporaries. While there certainly was a smattering of nobility present in the Belgian officer corps, it was not comparable to those of other European armies of the same period in either numbers or standing. For example, the British army raised no more than 5% from the ranks but retained upwards of 30% from the landed aristocracy and gentry.⁹¹ The Prussian officer corps was 65% aristocrat in 1860 and, despite societal changes influencing its composition, retained 30% by 1913.⁹² If anything, the Belgian army resembled the French Revolutionary armies to a far greater extent, whose willingness to promote local elites and professional men of good standing alongside NCOs (recruited through the same ballot system) had been fuelled by a similar sense of

⁹⁰ K.J. Quanten, 'De officieren van het Belgische leger in de negentiende eeuw: een historisch-sociologische benadering', (Unpublished Masters Thesis, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 1999), pp. 87-89.

⁹¹ Spiers, *Army and Society*, pp. 2-4 & 7-9; Spiers, *Late Victorian Army*, pp. 94-95.

⁹² M. Kitchen, *The German Officer Corps 1890-1914* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1968), p. 22. For other armies see, I. Deák, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848-1918* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990), pp. 160-164; E. Willis Brooks, 'The Russian Military Press in the Reform Era', in D. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye & B.W. Menning (eds.), *Reforming the Tsar's Army: Military Innovation in Imperial Russia from Peter the Great to the Revolution* (Woodrow Wilson Centre Press & Cambridge University Press, Washington D.C. & Cambridge, 2004), p. 121.

equality of opportunity as reigned in Belgium.⁹³ This demonstrates that, in some ways, the revolutionary spirit persisted in Belgium into the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or at least that a sense of military entitlement and obligation was not as pronounced among its nobility as elsewhere in Europe. Indeed, even the notion of an officer caste, from any social background, was not entirely being established through successive generations of *École Militaire* graduates.

This was not to say that some of its practices did not portray the officer corps as out of touch or insular. The continued use of the duel to propagate a military *esprit de corps* was one such example. Despite being outlawed in 1841, the duel was a means through which the army could distance itself from civilian life and promote its own ideals of honour that were inexorably linked with military performance. Perhaps in this way, a distinct, all-encompassing officer caste, ex-rankers or not, that played by its own rules, did manifest itself to the chagrin of the nation. Indeed, the *École Militaire* had published a directive in the early 1880s regarding duelling, stating that although it ought to be used within reason, it was sometimes necessary.⁹⁴ This was supported by an officer writing in *La Chronique* who claimed that it was an evil, but a necessary evil in order to guarantee the continued courteous relations between officers without resorting to verbal insults or brawls.⁹⁵ Both the press and the increasingly agitated politicians rubbished these arguments, along with the concept that it produced military effectiveness. They often pointed to Britain as an example of an army whose military prowess was beyond question but yet had dispensed with the archaic brutality of the

⁹³ R. Blaufarb, *The French army 1750-1820: Careers, talent, merit* (Manchester University Press, Manchester & New York, 2002), pp. 91-95 & 104-105; Porch, *March to the Marne*, pp. 17-18.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7 December 1886.

⁹⁵ *La Cronique*, 13 September 1893.

duel.⁹⁶ Two issues were particularly galling; firstly that it was a practice imposed upon officers and NCOs alike under the banner of a military code of conduct, and secondly that reprisals were never properly enforced, thus implying that the army could act above the law. On every occasion that a new report of a death or injury was circulated, these two parallel issues emanating from a barbaric military culture became hot topics for public debate.

The first of these issues, concerning the army's stance on duelling to maintain an *esprit de corps*, which separated them from their civilian counterparts, engendered a heightened sense of humanitarianism among large sections of society. The case of NCO Léon Edouard Vinchant, who was reminded by his superiors that he was duty-bound to defend his honour or risk the ridicule and stigma of being branded a coward, highlights the pressures often imposed upon men within the army. Vinchant sustained significant injuries that forced him to quit the service, leaving him unable to work in civilian life. Critics condemned the fact that upon a request for a pension compensating his injuries, the Minister of War denied him the right as a result of his wounds not being contracted due to his service in the army. This prompted one deputy to exclaim in the Chamber of Representatives that Vinchant was a 'victim of an institution which common law condemns [...] but that is glorified, exalted and imposed by military culture.' He added that any other soldier in the same position refusing to fight 'would be ostracised from the army, and under the weight of general disapproval would soon feel forced to leave.'⁹⁷ This type of incident created a strong humanitarian backlash on moral grounds and highlighted the gulf between accepted values in the army and society.

⁹⁶ *Journal d'Ypres*, 27 August 1890; and Plenum.be Chamber of Representatives Debates, 7 December 1886.

⁹⁷ Plenum.be Chamber of Representatives Debates, 17 February 1882.

Despite this, however, the army continued to take the law into its own hands. Sanctions for being involved in a duel could see an officer land a nominal fine of 25 francs when brought before a military tribunal; though more often than not, the penalty for not participating was far higher. A case brought up in the Chamber reflected this point perfectly. A captain in the mid-1880s had dined well one night and proceeded to a café to round off his evening. Whilst there, he was confronted by a man who jokingly ridiculed the officer in a more or less offensive manner, which the latter promptly laughed off, taking it all in good humour. However, upon hearing that he had not demanded to uphold his honour by duelling with the civilian, a military council called the officer of 27 years service in front of them and summarily forced him to leave the service, all because he had respected the civil law by which he was also bound.⁹⁸ It was this sort of contempt for the law that prompted many quarters to call for clarification as to where the army stood in relation to it.

The question was put to the Minister of War as to whether duelling ought to be allowed in the army. If not, then calls to unequivocally and uncompromisingly enforce the law would be made to ensure that the army was not a law unto itself. When politicians were questioned on the matter in 1903, it became abundantly clear that the Socialists, spoken for by Émile Vandervelde and Georges Lorand, were outraged and disgusted by the recurring issue, though the Minister of War at the time was a bit evasive and suggested that duelling in the army had largely ceased with the introduction of ‘honour councils’ to solve disputes in 1889.⁹⁹ Indeed, the general feeling against duelling ran so strongly in most quarters around the turn of the century that ‘The Belgian League Against the Duel’ was established in Brussels in 1903. It aimed to

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7 December 1886.

⁹⁹ *Journal d'Ypres*, 23 March 1903.

reduce the frequency of duelling, not only in Belgium but also across Europe in both military and civilian milieus. It was undeniably the evident frustration of the latter's opinion in Belgium, however, that concerned politicians. Public opinion was well expressed by the *Journal d'Ypres*, when it printed, 'The army, in which all of our children serve, is a part of a greater national family, and our primary interest, like our primary wish, is that we teach them to respect the law of God.'¹⁰⁰

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

We note the imposed obligation upon candidates to know the French language, and even take examinations in this tongue. Notwithstanding, it is noticeable that Flemish, the language of three quarters of the Belgian population, is not even mentioned in the Minister's orders. Therefore, students who have completed their primary education in establishments based in the Two Flanders, Antwerp, Limburg and Brabant, where studies are conducted in Flemish, will not be able to apply for entry to the Military School.¹⁰¹

Far from being reactionary in its approach, this article was formed on the basis of hard facts, which even three decades later had not significantly changed. Indeed, as noted before in Figure. 1.2. the importance weighting attributed to French over Flemish in the entrance examinations in 1867 was eight to three. Meanwhile, Figure. 1.3.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 27 August 1890.

¹⁰¹ *Le Messager de Gand*, 20 April 1835.

demonstrates the pre-requisite of already being proficient in French upon commencing the course at the *École de Guerre*, as French Literature was taught as opposed to French Language, though Flemish Language was a course unto itself. Tellingly, Flemish Language was taught for thirty hours during the entire year, the same as German and only ten hours more than English.

Language in the Belgian army is a sensitive and extremely complicated issue, and not without its methodological problems. Quite apart from anything else, regional dialects were not formalised into either a standardised Flemish or Walloon-French language until well into the nineteenth century, making it difficult to talk about language as a defined entity. Equally, there are few, if any traces of an officer's primary language of use left in either the service records or matriculation forms. This has made evaluations of language in the Belgian army particularly difficult for historians, who have been forced to accept the limitations of the available sources or explore the legislative aspects, which are better documented.¹⁰² While some studies have been known to simply state the place of birth as an indicator of linguistic leaning, this study has attempted to compute a more exact composition of the officer corps through the added use of statistical data taken from the census records of the nineteenth century. These records give an accurate breakdown by town and province of languages spoken by the male population, including bilingualism among the three national languages as of 1866 (Flemish and French, Flemish and German, and French and German). This allows for a more accurate assessment of the primary languages in use, taking into account, not only regional variations, but even differences within towns. In recognising

¹⁰² See R. Boijen *De Taalwetgeving in het Belgische Leger (1830 – 1940)* (Musée Royal de l'Armée/Koninklijk Legersmuseum, Brussels, 1992); R. Boijen, 'Het Leger als Smeltkroes van de Natie?', *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis*, no. 3, (1997), pp. 55-70; Stevens, '9de Linieregiment'; and Keymuelen & De Vos, 'de 80% - Mythe?'

that this method retains some limitations, it offers a better grasp of the proportion of likely primarily French, Flemish, German and bilingual speakers within each regiment sampled.

Although regional tensions and the language issue simmered throughout the course of the nineteenth century, it was not until the mid-1880s that strong calls for language equality in the army truly took root. The debate in the public domain was largely fought out in the press and the Chamber of Representatives in the three decades preceding the First World War, where claims of Flemish subjugation at the hands of a Walloon minority were aired.¹⁰³ This can be explained by a number of reasons, both social and military. Firstly, a codified language for Flanders was not agreed upon until 1864 (the Matthias de Vries-Jan te Winkel system), which made the *Flamingant* movement's aim to raise the Dutch language's profile a moot point beforehand. As the franchise extended, the need for political parties to present Flemish-speaking candidates offered opportunities for linguistic settlements that finally resulted in the equality law of 1898. As such it was not until this point that a true 'Flemish question' appeared; the only one concerning the authorities in the mid-nineteenth century was how to reverse the socio-economic disaster that had left Flanders destitute.¹⁰⁴ Militarily, too, the battle for general service that would see a greater number of Flemish soldiers join the colours under the stewardship of a majority French-speaking officer corps, only reached its nadir between 1909 and 1913, further demonstrating the tardy nature of the debate.

¹⁰³ Plenum.be Chamber of Representatives Debates, 22 May 1913.

¹⁰⁴ B. De Wever, 'The Case of the Dutch-Speaking Belgians in the Nineteenth Century', in P. Broomans (et. al.) (eds.), *The Beloved Mothertongue: Ethnolinguistic Nationalism in Small Nations: Inventories and Reflections* (Peeters, Leuven, Paris & Dudley, MA, 2008), pp. 55-56.

Perhaps, less widely appreciated however, is the continuous decline in Flemish-speaking officers towards the turn of the century from what had previously been, if not an equal footing, at least a healthy proportion of commissions in all branches of the service. Indeed, an examination of the overall linguistic breakdown in **Figure. 1.4. Percentages of languages spoken by Belgian-born officers 1845-1905.**¹⁰⁵

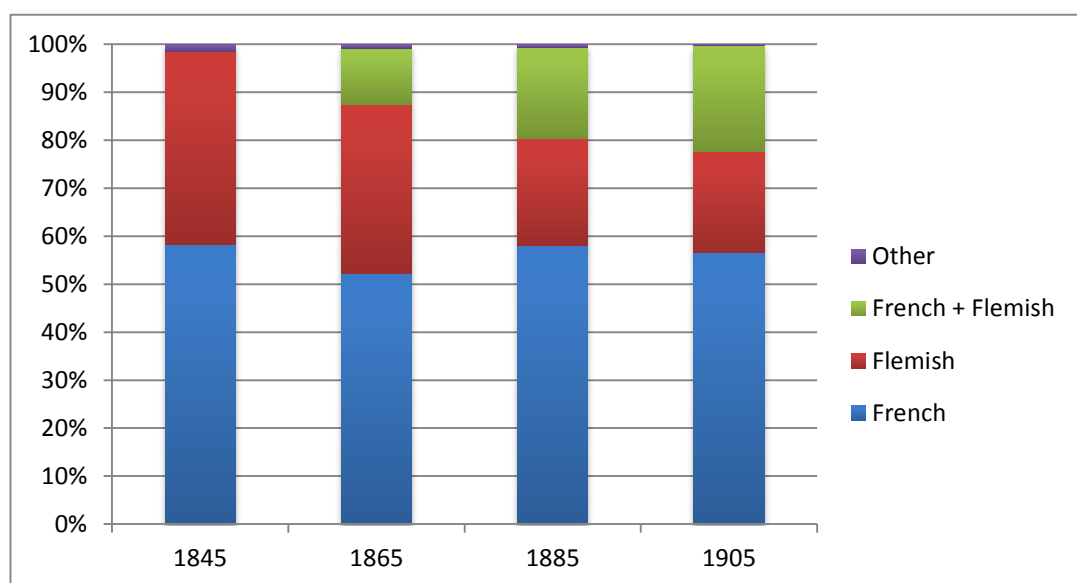


Figure. 1.4, demonstrates this point quite clearly. Whereas the percentage of French-speaking officers was constantly higher than their proportion of the population, which

¹⁰⁵ Data computed from the author's own database and statistics obtained from Belgium, Ministry of Interior, *Statistique Générale de la Belgique. Exposé de la Situation du Royaume (Période Décennale de 1841-1850)* (Brussels, 1852); *(Période Décennale de 1861-1870)* (Brussels, 1872) Title II; *Statistique de la Belgique. Population. Recensement général de 1846; 1866; 1880 and 1900*. While it is understood that all officers were required to speak a decent standard of French, this chart seeks to demonstrate the primary language of use at home. It must be noted that the 1846 census did not have an option for bilingualism and as such people's primary language was based on the majority of the commune from which they came. Equally, the 1846 census is based on the male population in its entirety, the 1866 and 1880 censuses on the male population above the age of two, and the 1900 census on the male population above the age of 15, adding yet further precision. It included all men born in Belgium to Belgian parents only. On use of statistical data from Belgian census records see also A. R. Zolberg, 'The Making of Flemings and Walloons: Belgium: 1830 – 1914', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 5, no. 2. (1974), pp. 179-235; and P. Levy, 'La Statistique des Langues en Belgique', *Revue de l'Institut de Sociologie*, vol. 18, no. 3. (1938), pp. 507-570.

largely stood at between 35% and 40%, it was only accentuated by the sharp decline of Flemish officers come the last quarter of the century. This was partly due to an increase in bilingualism in the two main languages, though at the expense of native Flemish, as opposed to native French speakers, and partly due to the increasing domination of French in the army. Admittedly, the Flemish had consistently been under-represented, especially when considering that, prior to the 1850s, French officers made up a large majority of the deficit in numbers. However, it is no surprise that the language issues in the army entered both military and public consciousness as of the 1880s, with the proportion of primarily Flemish-speaking officers falling over a period of time to a low of 21.2% by 1905.

When considering a breakdown by arm, a similar pattern naturally emerges, though with some notable differences. Despite some fluctuations, it is interesting to note that Flemish officers kept up a relatively steady flow of officers into the technical arms, despite accusations that they were being deprived of suitable opportunities to enter the *École Militaire*, which, as mentioned previously, became increasingly important in acquiring a commission to the artillery and engineers. Flemish representation in the technical arms generally mirrored or outpaced its overall average in the army (see Figures. 1.5 and 1.6). This meant that the overall decline in Flemish-speaking officers stemmed from an increasingly severe under-representation in the infantry and cavalry as the century wore on. Infantry percentages of primarily Flemish-speakers fell from a high of 37.1% in 1865 to an incredibly low 15.5% in 1905. Similarly, the cavalry's proportion dropped from 32% to 25.5% over the same period. What this demonstrates is that the perceived obstacles barring the progression of non-native French speakers from studying at the *École Militaire* were perhaps not as important as many have argued to date. A knowledge of French was, nevertheless

Figure. 1.5. Percentage values of primarily Flemish-speaking officers in the army overall and the technical arms 1845 to 1905.¹⁰⁶

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

Figure. 1.6. Cumulative percentage values of Flemish-speaking and naturally bilingual officers in the army overall and the technical arms 1865 to 1905.¹⁰⁷

<i>Arm</i>	<i>1845</i>	<i>1865</i>	<i>1885</i>	<i>1905</i>
<i>Overall</i>	-	46.8%	41.4%	43.3%
<i>Technical Arms</i>	-	44.4%	47.2%	54.76%

required, and this high proportion of Flemish officers entering the technical arms can be seen as a testament to the ambitious few who sought to advance their careers in the more prestigious corps. An acceptance of French as the language of mobility for a small minority, at least, can indeed go some way to explaining the significant increase in bilingual officers by the start of twentieth century. It reflects the civil situation of the Flemish petit-bourgeoisie in middle-management jobs who were confronted with similar obstacles.¹⁰⁸ As previously mentioned, the figures suggest that a significant proportion of these were actually Flemish men learning French as opposed to Walloons

¹⁰⁶ Author's database.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ De Wever, 'Dutch-Speaking Belgians', pp. 55-56.

learning Flemish, a telling fact that was not missed by an ever-growing disaffected public and their elected representatives.

This desire to learn the opposite region's language, however, was, according to many pro-Flemish politicians, not shared by the Walloon community. It was argued that, with the proposed introduction of general service in 1913, likely to increase Flanders' proportion of the rank and file to 60-65%, there was no good excuse for Walloon officers to remain ignorant of the importance of Flemish. The point was made that 'in a country of 3 million people who only speak Flemish, a big national institution like the army, cannot ignore this language'.¹⁰⁹ A complete overhaul of the officer corps, was naturally out of the question, as the imbalance of the Flemish/Walloon ratio could not be brought into line with their respective proportions of the population without significant consequences. As a result, Flemish representatives pushed for their language to feature more prominently in military education, mirroring their civilian policies. Indeed, Jean-Baptiste Coomans, the Catholic Representative for Turnhout, had expressed as early as 1884, 'There is not a company, not a squadron where there are no Flemish soldiers, sometimes in vast numbers. Is it not their natural and constitutional right to be commanded in Flemish, I do not say by Flemish, but in intelligible Flemish?'¹¹⁰ These views caused particular concern within the Liberal ranks. The prospect of obligatory, or at the very least, expected knowledge of Flemish among officers was a concept, which made them extremely uncomfortable. One such man was Jules Bara who articulated the view during the parliamentary sessions of 1887 and 1888 that these policies would significantly limit the opportunities of young Walloon men

¹⁰⁹ Plenum.be Chamber of Representatives Debates, 22 May 1913.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 8 February 1884.

seeking to make a career in the army.¹¹¹ Though, this could equally have been said about Flemish-born officers up to this point.

Notwithstanding, there were suggestions that the officer corps was not as ignorant of Flemish, nor categorically opposed to its increased use. The former of these points was raised in 1913 when the assertion that three-quarters of senior officers did not know a word of Flemish was contested. Of sixty-three senior officers – generals not included – a mere eighteen claimed knowledge of the language. Interestingly, however, the proportion was largely inversed among subalterns, where 334 out of 496 stated the same. This can be explained in two ways. Firstly, that the lower down the chain of command an officer was, the more likely he would be required to communicate with his NCOs and men, the majority of whom knew only Flemish dialects. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, however, was the hypothesis that suggested a convenient loss of memory occurred when officers reached their majority. Purposefully ‘forgetting’ Flemish was not uncommon, it was postulated, as senior officers who claimed to be able to speak it, often found themselves burdened with extra work, presiding over Flemish military councils and the like.¹¹² Although it is difficult to quantify the number of officers who used this excuse to their advantage, it appears plausible when comparing the stark contrast in figures between junior and senior officers who admitted to knowing the language. This is not to say that all officers, Walloon and Flemish alike, shied away from the increasing pressure placed upon them to become more accessible to their men. In their paternalistic role as the ‘fathers’ of the nation, it was deemed by some that it was only right to be bilingual in order to fairly

¹¹¹ Ibid., 14 December 1887; and 25 April 1888. For more on the opposing Walloon movement see, M. Van Ginderachter & J. Leerssen, ‘Denied ethnicism: on the Walloon movement in Belgium’, *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2012), pp. 230-246.

¹¹² Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 23 April 1913.

dole out military justice and be a good influence on all recruits, regardless of the linguistic issue.¹¹³ Officers of both regions and languages openly supported this view, though proposed changes to promote Flemish in the army were not projected to be in place before 1917, and with the coming of war were delayed even further.

As much as the social issue of language plagued the army, it was only exacerbated by party politics, which often manifested itself within the officer corps as well. Many pro-Flemish officers and politicians were associated with the conservative Catholic Party whose roots were firmly imbedded in rural Flanders. Recognised as military-sceptics, the Catholics were often depicted as the army's biggest enemy, which unsurprisingly bred a certain degree of animosity amongst Liberal officers. This was often expressed through the creation of exclusive political societies to which officers became attached, fostering a sense of 'them and us' within the ever dissolving peacetime army. Membership of societies such as the *Association Libérale de Bruxelles* were often questioned by Catholics on the grounds of legality which ought to have been subject to an 1810 law prohibiting such affiliations. These remarks were made in the wake of accusations that the Liberal Governments were treating Catholic officers unfairly by allowing their Liberal counterparts to join such guilds but preventing the creation of, and admission to, their conservative counterparts.¹¹⁴ A definitive ruling as to the legality of these societies was less than forthcoming and allowed them and others, such as association to the Freemasons, to continue unabated. The result was that officers were often in direct confrontation with one another over their politics at the expense of military discipline, efficiency and image. This went contrary to General Prisse's circular stating: 'I desire that you do not neglect the need to protect from, and to

¹¹³ Ibid., 22 May 1913.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 14 January 1885.

reprimand all officers' affiliations to, societies which, directly or indirectly, impose on them obligations that are incompatible with their military duties.' No official sanctions however, led to increasingly public expressions of divisions, which saw newspapers begin to print stories about Liberal Sub-Lieutenants being barred from cafés with strictly Catholic clientele.¹¹⁵

In the Chamber of Representatives, the civil-military battle intensified even further when religion was brought into the fold. The obligation imposed upon officers to participate in *Te Deum*, a public ceremony recognising the importance of religion in society, deeply offended the Liberals. Despite the army's link to the ceremony dating back to 1850 and the implicit demonstration of loyalty to the King, under whose orders they were traditionally obliged to participate, the Liberals felt that in an age and country where faith was rapidly declining, an obligatory presence went against the country's rhetoric of defending liberties. The latter's belief that, upon joining the army, officers gave up a portion of their freedom and owed an added sense of loyalty to the monarch as both head of state and the army, went little way to convincing their political opponents that religion had a place in the military establishment. Indeed, they feared that a continuation of this practice could soon filter down into society and force many non-believers to submit to Church authority.¹¹⁶ In this way the army was caught in a crossfire of social, political and military interests on a public stage, unable to keep all parties happy without displeasing others.

Public infighting did nothing to promote the solid façade that the army desired and ought to have projected. Indeed, politics within the officer corps ran deeper, creating even greater divides when it began influencing promotion. For example, Lt.

¹¹⁵ *Journal d'Ypres*, 11 March 1891.

¹¹⁶ Plenum.be Chamber of Representatives Debates, 15 March 1905; and 21 March 1905.

Gen. De Selliers de Moranville was convinced that the Government was purposefully inhibiting Catholics to the profit of those officers known to be Freemasons.¹¹⁷ This was, however, coming from a man who felt destined for important positions but whose abilities, when being considered for the role of Minister of War, were described by his peers rather differently: 'It would be like jumping from the sightless to the blind. His nomination would be a catastrophe.'¹¹⁸ Notwithstanding what might be considered de Selliers' own biased view of his own affairs, other notable examples of political prejudice were apparent, particularly in the selection process of officers for high-ranking positions. During the search for suitable candidates to take over the portfolio of Minister of War in 1912, a number of officers were considered, and subsequently rejected based on their political views alone. Others were categorised by their politics before being dismissed on various unrelated grounds, though the initial separation is telling in itself. The Premier, Charles de Broqueville, a Catholic himself, believed General Dufour to be an ideal nomination, though doubted that he would accept a position in a Catholic cabinet, demonstrating that political prejudice ran both ways.¹¹⁹ As such the issue of politics was as much a determining factor in an officer's progression as language in the peacetime army, though other factors similarly played a part.

Peacetime soldiering, although the norm in the army of a perpetually neutral state, produced both a stage for social problems to be expressed as well as engendering purely military issues that contributed to strike at the foundations of the professionalism and excellence implemented during its formative years. Boredom, apathy, and in

¹¹⁷ Archives d'État du Royaume (AER) 1510/38, no. 294, De Broqueville Papers, De Selliers to Hellebaut, 3 September 1911.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., no. 295: De Broqueville Papers, Renseignements, March 1912.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., De Broqueville Papers, Collon to Neuray, 2 March 1912 and 17 March 1912.

particular ever slowing promotion rates soon disillusioned a number within the officer corps. The standard procedure for peacetime promotion saw commissions to sub-lieutenant awarded solely to men with two years experience as an NCO or who had completed a course at the *École Militaire*. This created a comparatively wide spread of social backgrounds in the officer corps to most other European armies. Promotion to lieutenant and subsequently to captain required two years of service in each rank, after which it became four years to attain a majority. A minimum of three years as a major would allow for promotion to lieutenant-colonel, and two more years would pave the way to a colonelcy. During times of war, these timeframes were to be halved. Promotion, aside from the limitations imposed upon each rank, was carried out on a part-seniority and part-merit system, which saw two thirds of infantry and cavalry commissions to sub-lieutenant awarded nominally by the King, and a third to NCOs; whereas two thirds were allocated to *École Militaire* graduates in the technical arms. Nominations to the ranks of lieutenant and captain were half by seniority in the entirety of the arm in question, and half at the behest of the King, whilst the Monarch also claimed complete control of the promotions to senior ranks. This system had a number of flaws despite conceptually retaining a degree of fairness while encouraging talent. However, the mere fact that some nineteen modifications had been implemented in the forty years between 1872 and 1912 demonstrates the frustrating realities of an imperfect marriage of ideals. The attempt at this delicate balancing act soon bred discontent as talented officers did not always get their just rewards as the weight of seniority in an ever-growing officer corps created a bottle-neck which slowed promotion rates and dampened prospects to the point of disillusionment and precarious morale.

The debate was broken down into two main sections; that concerning promotion to senior commands, and those of more junior officers. The former, nominally selected

on merit by appointed military committees, proved to be a particular problem with regards to a perceived penchant for patronage and favouritism, which often saw one branch of the service dominate over others. This was a result of ‘stacked’ panels of senior officers selecting men for divisional or territorial commands from their branch of the service rather than those who merited the position or were next on the seniority list. This was often seen to favour the artillery, especially over the infantry, which had notoriously slow promotion rates anyway. Simply passing over the most senior infantry officer, for example, in favour of a preferred artillery candidate, could seriously dislocate the former’s advancement dynamics by creating a blockage at the top of the order. With senior positions appearing infrequently and not being evenly distributed amongst the various arms, certain ones, such as the infantry, became undesirable as the prospects of rapid promotion lower down the chain were quashed by the immobility of its senior ranks. This blatant display of favouritism was not always the norm, as quite often committees were known to appoint officers to senior commands based entirely on seniority across all arms, but its occasional occurrence still irritated the authorities and the meritorious.

Following the Brassine report of 1895, brigade commands were to be handed to officers from within that branch of the service, though mixed units considerably complicated matters. Appointments tended to still be made on seniority for the former, but greater emphasis was placed on true merit, intelligence and ability to fill the posts of the latter. Once again, however, this subjective issue raised a number of questions with regard to equality of opportunity. Rather unhelpfully, a 1912 report stated that it would be ideal if all colonels had the capabilities to be promoted to general and command brigades irrespective of their composition, as it would permit the simple

application of the seniority list.¹²⁰ This was clearly just wishful thinking, though it did highlight the need for changes to be made to the system of bogus selection committees, which had been running on the same lines since the Royal Decree of 15 April 1890. New suggestions were put forward to replace the High Committee of Generals, with a more balanced panel lower down the chain of command. Divisional commanders of both the infantry and cavalry would preside over panels composed of their brigade commanders to decide on promotions and retirements up to, and including, the rank of colonel and submit their proposals to the Minister of War. Similarly, the Governor-General of fortified positions would preside over a panel composed of the infantry, artillery and engineer commanders at his disposal to carry out the same duties. The idea behind this initiative was that these committees would be more aware of the capabilities of officers in their immediate surroundings, resulting in the weeding out of incapables, and the recommendation of those with merit. Additionally, with the divisional commander being held responsible for all propositions made, it was hoped that patronage and favour would be much reduced, as their own career prospects would be subject to review. This, it was hoped, would provide a more suitable pool of senior officers from which divisional and territorial generals could be selected in the future.

Lower down the chain of command, however, the prospects of a military career remained under severe scrutiny throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century. In a speech concerning an amendment to the 1886 Promotion Bill, Count Adrien d'Oultremont voiced the concerns of all officers when he stated: 'The experience of the last fifty years has proved that the principal factor influencing the progression of careers

¹²⁰ AER 1510/40, no. 299, de Broqueville Papers, Report entitled: 'Revision of the Status of the Officer Corps', 1912.

[...] is nothing more than pure chance.’¹²¹ What he meant by this was that a number of anomalies and vices had crept into the half and half system, which satisfied neither promotion by merit nor seniority. Favouritism was once again the root of the issue, and had bred a certain degree of apathy within the corps as officers often felt that verve, talent and application went little way to guaranteeing promotion by merit. This loss of dedication to the professional standards inculcated from the formative years was concerning and prompted a series of proposed modifications. Among them were suggestions to abolish promotion by merit in its current form and introduce a system of supplements to seniority that would establish good service. These might include recommendations, General Staff brevets, or other relevant experience. However, opponents argued that achievements did not necessarily translate into talent or merit.¹²² Additionally, this system would not benefit the average officer who, by chance or design, would not find himself in the position to obtain recognition as other more ambitious or fortunate colleagues. While it was clearly a justifiable concern, it did nothing to inspire confidence in the assiduous who felt their careers were stagnating before them.

Compounding matters was the gradual slowing of promotion rates across the army over the course of the nineteenth century. Variations between branches made for lean and prosperous periods at given junctures, but this served only to heighten discontent and rivalry among the embittered. This was exemplified in 1868 when a cavalry officer, Colonel Wolff, attempted to improve his promotion prospect by transferring into the Gendarmerie. In a note to the King, the Minister of War, Auguste

¹²¹ Ibid., de Broqueville Papers, General Considerations Regarding the Proposed Modifications to the Law of 16 June 1836 Governing the Promotion of Officers.

¹²² Ibid., de Broqueville Papers, Proposition on the Law of Officer Promotions by M. Driant, 1912.

Goethals, explained that this had proven successful previously due to the experience of cavalry officers being highly valued. However, its pitfall was the small size of the Gendarmerie which lent itself to blockages if a more senior cavalry officer transferred, which was what occurred in Wolff's case. It was noted that, had he persisted in the cavalry (which had the benefit of not allowing Gendarmerie officers to transfer into it), he would have benefited from swifter promotion.¹²³

This seeming disillusionment with the rate of promotion in the cavalry is interesting however as, at this time, it boasted the quickest promotion rates of any branch of the army. On average, a cavalry officer in 1875 would attain their majority

Figure. 1.7. Years of service for Lieutenants to attain a majority, 1845-1875.¹²⁴

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

after 25 and a quarter years service, compared to the 27 years in the infantry. Similarly, whereas the rate of promotion had remained relatively stable for junior officers in the cavalry since 1845, the infantry's had slowed by three years over the same period. This was on account of the expansion in the numbers of junior officers entering the infantry, which was not exponential to the number of senior posts created. This was not the case for the cavalry, which benefitted from a more controlled re-organisation over time. Conversely, the expansion of the technical arms, coupled with the higher prospects of

¹²³ RA 2132, Note concerning Colonel Wolff of the Gendarmerie by Goethals, 29 September 1868.

¹²⁴ Author's database. Promotion dates taken from matriculation forms of Lieutenants in sampled regiments in 1845 and 1875.

the increasing proportion of *École Militaire* graduates, saw the rate of promotion in these arms accelerate significantly over the same three decades. This was particularly the case in the engineers to the ranks of lieutenant and captain, which were twice as quick as those in the cavalry and infantry respectively. This meant that in comparison to the technical arms of the British army (which were the only ones not controlled by purchase before 1871), Belgian artillery and engineer regiments could expect their senior lieutenant to have served almost five years fewer, but their senior major two and half years more.¹²⁵

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

All that it [the infantry] had in terms of men of valour have disappeared, disgusted by the ‘arrivistes’ who have profited from the last regime to decapitate this arm to the point that we were forced to promote to General an entire group of incapables, who ordinarily ought not to have exceeded the rank of Captain.¹²⁶

This had been an on-going trend, which not only reduced the standard of officer within the army, but projected a poor image to society, which induced negative repercussions for prospective candidates. Indeed, *La Belgique Militaire*, an official internal military

¹²⁵ Spiers, *Late Victorian Army*, p. 91.

¹²⁶ AER 1510/38, no. 295, de Broqueville Papers, Collon to Neuray, 17 March 1912.

publication, wrote as early as 1871 that the officer corps was becoming an appealing career for the uninterested sons of great families, sons of a military background, and those with no particular career in mind.¹²⁷ Why would the qualified son of bourgeois family choose a potentially stunted career in the army when he could make his fortune in business with half as much hassle? In its inability to satisfactorily promote the prospects of a military career, the officer corps risked losing the elements it desired the most to retain the standards of professionalism inculcated in its formative years.

Part of the problem stemmed from insufficient, or poorly applied, means to rid the corps of unwanted elements. This had two effects; firstly, retaining a group of incapable officers within the service, and secondly, creating unwanted congestion, which stifled and disaffected the more talented elements. A Royal Decree in 1855 had fixed the maximum age limits of officers by rank, beyond which they would be pensioned off. Junior officers could serve until the age of 55, majors and lieutenant-colonels until 58, colonels until 60, major-generals until 63 and lieutenant-generals until 65, though a degree of latitude was applied in a number of cases.¹²⁸ It was hoped, that the correct application would see officers being pensioned off not only for 'physical incapacities but moral ones as well'.¹²⁹ However, in an increasingly unusual demonstration of solidarity, it was found that this option had been very sparingly used as a result of a unanimous opinion that officers' pensions were too low to justify this act. Not until the pension situation in the army had been resolved on the eve of the First World War and brought up to parity with other sections of the civil service did this action increase in frequency.

¹²⁷ *La Belgique Militaire*, 30 April 1871.

¹²⁸ RA 159/102, Royal Decree No. 9422, 18 April 1855.

¹²⁹ AER 1510/40, no. 299, de Broqueville Papers, Report entitled: 'Revision of the Status of the Officer Corps', 1912.

This delay in proceedings, however, was too late to significantly alter the general situation of disgruntlement that had firmly taken root over the preceding decades. This can clearly be seen through a rather alarming encounter that De Selliers had with an officer in 1911, in which the latter asked not to be nominated for promotion. This caused the former to write to de Broqueville in order to make him aware of what he perceived to be a crisis of morale. After receiving confirmation from other sources of similar attitudes across a number of garrisons, particularly Gent and Antwerp, he made clear his anxiety concerning the state of the officer corps as a whole.¹³⁰ Many of the early principles upon which the army was founded, especially its professionalism, had all but disappeared through the inertia of peacetime soldiering. This forced many ambitious young men to make a decision regarding their futures as career officers, leaving many with no choice but to leave the service altogether or explore other avenues in order to avoid stagnation.

One of the most appealing options was service in the Congo Free State on special detachment from the line. Laurent A. Six, in his work on the subject, claims that some 589 officers took to service in the Congo between 1877 and 1908 for a multitude of reasons. These included, boredom of barrack life, a desire for adventure and conquering the unknown, a certain notion of humanitarianism, but above all the quest for more rapid advancement.¹³¹ This was especially the case among the young and those who had come through the ranks who felt their chances of promotion were somewhat limited in the current circumstances. Indeed, higher rates of pay and bonuses, paid for by the Belgian Government it must be added, and a temporary step in rank, were enough to convince many ambitious officers to take a chance in the severe climate. Despite

¹³⁰ AER 1510/38, no. 294, de Broqueville Papers, De Selliers to de Broqueville, 26 November 1911.

¹³¹ Six, *Officiers Belges au Congo*, pp. 25-29.

reverting back to their metropolitan rank upon their return, the frequency with which it was restored by royal patronage made the gamble worth taking.¹³² Indeed, with the right connections and a great deal of vigour, it was possible for officers to at least regain their old positions if not better them by making a case for their added experience gained in Africa.¹³³ According to some, the authorities were eager to accede to the requests of returning officers, simply to keep them in the army. There had been an alarming increase in the number of resigned commissions in order to take up posts in the financially lucrative commercial companies with which they had had close dealings whilst in Africa.¹³⁴ The Liberal representative for Brussels, Émile Féron, was particularly concerned with the apparent preferentialism accorded to Congo returnees, stating in 1893 that:

there will inevitably be inequality between those officers who take service in the Congo and those who remain in Belgium. It follows that the former will have opportunities to distinguish themselves that will not be afforded to the others. The latter will evidently suffer from this state of affairs, and, consequently, will make the military careers of these young men who do not wish to serve abroad, insufferable. [...] I, I shall repeat again, assert that, for those officers who do not serve in the Congo, promotion will become more and more difficult, and that is already a serious fact.¹³⁵

Ironically, the attempt to retain the services of one group of disgruntled officers, albeit with newly acquired campaign experience, only served to irk another group who stayed

¹³² Ibid., pp. 29-30.

¹³³ MRA, Belgian Military Abroad, Congo 43/55 XV 258-263. Doquier to wife, 2 November 1896.

¹³⁴ Plenum.be Chamber of Representatives Debates, 3 March 1905.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 13 July 1893.

home. Yet, if attempts to keep the former had not been taken, it is plausible that a great deal more officers would have resigned their commissions and returned to the Congo to make their fortunes. In this way, the authorities found themselves in an unwinnable position concerning the maintenance of morale within the officer corps, though the resulting political battle only intensified with time.

The issue at hand was largely concerned with the Government's continued obligation to pay the salaries of officers serving in the Congo, despite them nominally being under the authority of the Free State. Belgium did not annex their colony until 1908. More galling still was that none of the 1,612 NCOs who served alongside their officers in the *Force Publique* obtained the same support nor were allowed to retain their metropolitan ranks. Abuses of the system were once again the crux of the argument, with officers often being paid supplements for horses and other effects that they either did not need or did not have. Despite this, the interim Minister of War in 1897, Jules Vandennepeereboom, was adamant that the Government would not alter the state of affairs, given that it could only be beneficial to the army to have men of experience return to its cadres.¹³⁶ Eight years later, the then Minister of War, Alexandre Cousebant d'Alkemade, had to defend himself against repeated onslaughts regarding the payment of officers who were supposed to be attached to the *Institut Cartographique Militaire* at La Cambre in the service of the home army, but were in fact in Africa supporting and promoting the commercial interests of the Free State's entrepreneurs. In his mind, whether the officers were physically in the Congo or not made little difference as they were still nominally on active service with full rights to pay and supplements accorded to other officers on mission or detachment to foreign armies. This appears to contradict reports in the press that quoted the Minister of War

¹³⁶ Ibid., 18 May 1897.

in 1894 saying that the home army's cadres would not suffer from the continuous exodus of officers as they were all on the list of Reserves.¹³⁷ Whatever their true status, it is evident that their presence in the Congo was both a qualitative and quantitative drain on an officer corps whose drive to retain early standards of professionalism was waning.

Following the shambolic Belgian mobilisation during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-71, the authorities became increasingly pre-occupied with the reorganisation of the army to counter any future threat. Part of the unsolved questions concerned the officer corps, and particularly that of the Officer Reserve to fill the cadres of expanded units when placed on a war footing. Numbers had been a persistent thorn in the side of this corps, which, according to one correspondent, was some 800 infantry officers short by 1897.¹³⁸ Although it allowed loyal officers the opportunity to continue offering their services to the army and the nation (providing that they were below the maximum age limits of 58 for junior officer, 63 for majors, 65 for colonels and 68 for generals) surprisingly few opted to take this route. This lack of enthusiasm can partly be attributed to the questionable legality of the status of reserve officers and the subsequent dual role they were asked to perform. The Royal Decree of 22 December 1887 creating and nominating reserve officers was found to be at odds with, as well as legally inferior to, the Law of 16 June 1856, which established four categories of officer that did not include a reserve. Despite being appointed for eight years by Royal Decree under the guise of officers on unpaid leave – a position which could actually only be maintained for one year – they were all subject to service in the Civic Guard as well, due to their

¹³⁷ *Gazette de Charleroi*, 22 December 1894.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 16 March 1897.

official classification as civilians.¹³⁹ Such an uncertain situation was uncomfortable enough without the added insult of being excluded from annual training camps and manoeuvres prior to 1903. Naturally this proved unpopular with those on the reserve lists and drew some piercing remarks from French observers in 1897 who questioned: ‘Is it not a crime to stop these devoted men to prepare themselves during peacetime for duties which we will expect of them during war?’¹⁴⁰ It is unsurprising, therefore, that numbers remained low until the outbreak of war, when the true effects of discordant policy truly materialised.

Attempts to resolve the numerical deficiencies led to the decision to admit one-year volunteers and men from the newly established University Companies to fill the reserve cadres. Both were to first learn the responsibilities of corporals and serve in this rank for six months (eight for the cavalry and artillery) before sitting an examination to attain the brevet rank of sergeant. Following two years as sergeants, during which time the University Companies were subject to two annual recalls of fifteen days training, manoeuvres and shooting drills, they were permitted to take the examination to become reserve brevet sub-lieutenants, with the full rank being accorded following further appearances at annual recalls.¹⁴¹ Whereas in France, the creation of one-year volunteers was introduced after the abolition of replacement in the ranks in 1872 to allow the wealthy to escape conscription, Belgium’s system ran concurrently with the ballot until 1909. This offered yet another route of escape from military service for those destined

¹³⁹ Plenum.be Chamber of Representatives Debates, 17 June 1903; and *Gazette de Charleroi*, 4 August 1896.

¹⁴⁰ *Gazette de Charleroi*, 20 September 1897.

¹⁴¹ AER 1510/40, no. 299, de Broqueville Papers, Report: ‘Modifications to be made concerning the recruitment of Reserve Officers. A system that could substitute the current system. University Companies – Incorporation of the annual contingent.’ 1911.

for the liberal professions, albeit harnessing their capacities in the reserve rather than losing out entirely.¹⁴²

To seemingly be filling the numerical void with the right class of man, who contributed towards the training costs, was a favourable outcome for the Catholics in their battle to avoid general service. Nevertheless, there were a number of problems, both qualitative and legal that proved difficult to overcome. This was especially the case for the University Companies who found themselves at the centre of a press storm questioning their utility. The editor of the *Gazette de Liège* examined the need to perhaps adopt the French system of maintaining a gap between the classroom and the barracks so as to avoid the current situation, which was providing neither a profound education, nor suitably trained soldiers.¹⁴³ Catholic policy had always been to protect the interests of students (particularly those in theology) from the corruptive distractions of the barracks, but pressure from the military authorities to ensure that the army was not being deprived of its best elements through this system eventually forced change. A law, set for 1913, obliged students to put their military duties first by allowing them a mere fifteen days leave prior to their exams to attend to their scholarly needs.¹⁴⁴ This ensured that training was not curtailed and that these men shared at least some of the burden enforced on the average balloted man before retreating into the shadow of the officer reserve. It equally reinforced a shared European-wide desire to concentrate on the physical growth of the individual to counter a perceived social degeneration in the late nineteenth century.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Porch, *March to the Marne*, p. 25.

¹⁴³ *Gazette de Liège*, 19 July 1911.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 17 November 1911.

¹⁴⁵ AER 1510/40, no. 299, de Broqueville Papers, Report: 'Modifications to Reserve Officers', 1911.

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

Linguistic, religious and political issues, which mirrored societal trends, exemplified the complications that came to undermine the preparedness of the army to satisfactorily manage the trials that would accompany the twentieth century. Disaffection of primary Flemish-speakers reached its nadir in the decades preceding the outbreak of war as Flanders' population moved towards bilingualism to compete with the disproportionate number of native French speakers in middle-ranking professions, including the officer corps. Overt discrimination, such as the decision not to appoint Lieutenant-General Clooten to the rank of Minister of War as a result of his

‘deplorable Flemish accent’, did nothing to instil confidence in an increasingly disaffected body of men.¹⁴⁶ Slowing promotion rates on account of peacetime soldiering and a lack of wastage, further eroded the morale of all concerned, which inevitably detracted from the qualitative standards of the early days. Significant numbers chanced their arm in the Congo where the financial reward in heading up burgeoning commercial enterprises far exceeded the prospects of decades’ worth of garrison duty in provincial Belgian towns. This not only siphoned off the most ambitious and energetic elements of the officer corps, but also dissuaded future generations of middle-class prospects from a military career. By the outbreak of war in 1914, therefore, the officer corps lacked the requisite professionalism and unity that it had sought upon its establishment in the 1830s as a result of a combination of social, political and military problems that, despite being acknowledged, proved too formidable to adequately contain.

¹⁴⁶ AER 1510/38, no. 295, de Broqueville Papers, Collon to Neuray, 2 March 1912.

Chapter 2 - Recruiting the Rank and File

Recruitment for the Belgian army was a perennial problem during the nineteenth century, not so much in acquiring the quantity of men necessary to maintain its 80,000 – 100,000 wartime establishment, but more so in terms of the socio-political problems that surrounded the social injustices of the ballot system through which it was obtained. Annual levies of between 10,000 and 13,300 men were voted by the Parliament each year as a supplement to volunteers; though the latter being so few in number meant that the ballot, operating on a regional basis across the country, was the dominant source of manpower. Faculty for replacement and substitution provided an escape from the burden of military service for an extortionate price and, as such, became seen as the rich man's privilege, leaving the rest of society to suffer the 'blood tax' in their stead. This social injustice sat uneasily in a liberal country and found itself at the heart of a fierce civil-military debate until the twentieth century when a string of Ministers of War introduced voluntary enlistment, partial conscription and full conscription successively in little over a decade. Pressure from the military authorities to introduce personal and obligatory service earlier, particularly following Prussian military successes in 1866 and 1870, fell on deaf ears in government who, whether Liberal or Catholic, were wary of disaffecting the 1.1% of the population who formed the electorate and were the major beneficiaries of the ballot and replacement system.¹⁴⁷ The commercial centre of the country, Antwerp, was a case in point, where businesses relied on keeping working hands free from the grasp of the army. Here, a separate pressure group known as the *Meetings* was established to defend the interests of the city's economy by blocking all attempts at increasing the military burden. Their

¹⁴⁷ Wanty, *Milieu Militaire*, p. 47.

increasing influence, particularly within the Catholic Party, reflected the strong sense of anti-militarism that pervaded large swathes of the country. This went on to characterise the nature of opposition towards military reform for the remainder of the century.

International tensions, coupled with the rise of socialism in the 1880s, and the emergence of Flemish consciousness, all contributed to the disorganised nature of the army in the decades preceding the First World War. Not only did it lack numbers, training, and equipment but was also sorely in need of an identity, which as a tool of nation building, the army failed to successfully muster. As a result, regional recruitment under the 1913 general service laws did much to form the basis of separate regional interpretations of Belgian identity within the framework of the national institution that was the armed forces, though remained undeveloped by the outbreak of war the following year. The army that mobilised in the face of European aggression in August 1914 encapsulated eighty years-worth of a stubborn civil-military debate that had its roots in competing ideologies over the fabric of nationhood between the country's foremost two political parties.

The ballot system, upon which the army was recruited, was simply a continuation of the French 1798 and Dutch 1815 and 1817 laws already in use in the Belgian provinces. This was more to do with the urgency of establishing an organised army in the face of unremitting Dutch aggression until the peace of 1839 than a calculated method to best suit the country. Indeed, a standing army was preferably to be avoided. The inheritors of national defence were initially to be the constitutionally-raised Civic Guard, which had embodied the revolutionary spirit of the *petit*

bourgeoisie and played an important role in the fight for independence.¹⁴⁸ This force will be discussed further in Chapter 4. However, the situation requiring the retention of the army on a war footing for the first decade of its existence made the voting of the annual levies by Parliament an act of course beyond the Treaty of London. It cemented the ballot system in place for the remainder of the century, despite the many socio-military problems that came with it.

Initially, annual contingents of 12,000 men were called up to supplement the small number of voluntary enlistments before the 1840 class was reduced to 10,000 men as the army returned to a peacetime footing. The burden was shared proportionally by head of population across all nine provinces, where every registered twenty-year-old male, who had not already obtained a form of exemption, physical or otherwise, was called up alphabetically in a public event to draw his lot from the ballot box. The lowest numbers - until the province's quota was completed - were to form, along with the other provinces, the annual levy for that year. However, exemptions, replacements and substitutions, which will all be expanded upon in due course, often significantly changed the composition of the initial draw.¹⁴⁹ Those finally incorporated would then be dispersed across various regiments throughout the country on an eight-year active engagement to be followed up with five years in the reserve. This distribution was an attempt to inculcate a sense of national unity based, as much as possible, on the principles of liberalism as well as a counter-measure to the strong local and regional affiliations that dominated concepts of ethno-cultural identity in parts of the Low

¹⁴⁸ AER Nothomb Papers, 213, Report on the Organisation and Composition of the Army, (date unclear) 1844.

¹⁴⁹ For a more detailed explanation of the ballot process, including the public spectacle aspect of it, see De Vos, *Het Militiewtgeving*.

Countries at this time.¹⁵⁰ Men who were not called up were still liable for any subsequent levy that was found to be deficient in numbers until they had reached their twenty-third birthday, whilst they were all compelled to serve in the *Garde Civique* until the age of 50.

The implementation of national recruitment coupled with the retention of a form of conscription in the shape of the ballot, therefore, aimed to make the army the ‘school of the nation’ in the same manner as the French Revolutionary army had done in the late eighteenth century.¹⁵¹ This should come as little surprise given the extent of French influence in the army during its formative years, both in terms of the physical presence of officers as well as those of Belgian origin smitten with the early ideas of nationalism whilst under French rule. Given Else Witte’s premise that the 1830 Revolution had not been fought on nationalistic grounds, it is not difficult to see why such a process was deemed useful. Indeed, other studies have contended that individual identity barely attained recognition beyond a local level, particularly among the peasantry, and that, even among the elites, competing notions prevented the emergence of a clear definition of what it meant to be Belgian.¹⁵² In contrast to other institutions, such as national schooling or the Church, which possessed equal access to, and influence on, a large proportion of the population, the army was considered to be more suited to the role of nation building due to its perceived divorce from party politics. Of course this was far

¹⁵⁰ AER Rogier Papers, POS 2328/417, Note by the Recruitment Committee, 10 April 1850. See also, Van Ginderachter, ‘Ethnolinguistic Nationalism’, pp. 1-13; and Beyen & Van Ginderachter, ‘General Introduction’, pp. 7-8.

¹⁵¹ Forrest, ‘*La patrie en danger*’, pp. 25-30.

¹⁵² E. Witte, *Construction de la Belgique*, pp. 42-43. For use of language as a tool of nation-building, p. 187. For regional consciousness see, A.B. Murphy, *The Regional Dynamics of Language Differentiation in Belgium: A Study in Cultural-Political Geography* (University of Chicago, 1988), p. 9; Beyen & Van Ginderachter, ‘General Introduction’, pp. 8-9; and De Wever, ‘Dutch-Speaking Belgians’, pp. 49-50.

from the case in reality, though the lack of overt politicisation made the army a more attractive option.

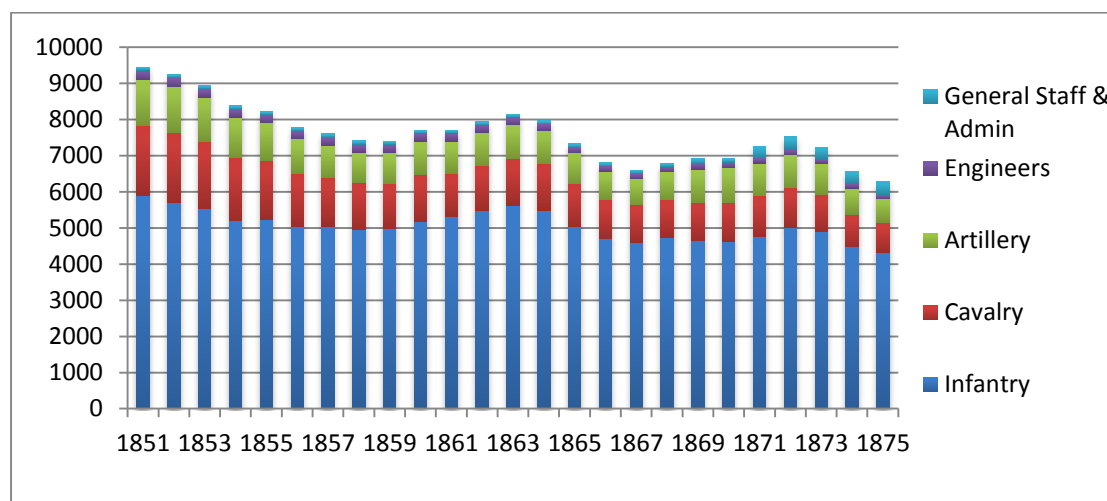
Yet, if the army was the road along which a national identity was forged, then language was certainly to be the vehicle. With such a disparate range of dialects from both Flanders and Wallonia forming the linguistic profile of the country, the decision to implement French was not a malicious attempt by the ruling elite to dominate the Flemish masses. It was anything but. Indeed, it was equally as unlikely for a Walloon peasant to understand standardised French as his Flemish counterpart, therefore all but dismissing the common misconception surrounding the language debate. The army's linguistic policy only became a divisive issue with the awakening of a wider Flemish consciousness after the 1850s, which later associated itself with Catholic conservatism. Prior to this it was to be a unifying force behind which the system of recruitment was to operate. It was on this basis that the Belgian army was to attempt to recruit a large enough army to act as a deterrent to external threat, whilst simultaneously fighting against the internal forces of social unrest and deep-seated anti-militarism.¹⁵³

Once the army returned to a peacetime footing, voluntary recruitment accounted for a little over 11.5% of the army's overall establishment. Indeed, the 1852 Recruitment Committee published a table based on the previous year's statistics, which demonstrated how the 80,000 strong force boasted, rather modestly, 9,224 men who

¹⁵³ For a detailed study of anti-militarism in Belgium, see F. Lehouck, *Het antimilitarisme in België, 1830-1914*, (Brussel, 1958). More recent historiography would suggest that Belgium was not as anti-militaristic as originally thought, becoming increasingly engaged in a two-way reciprocal relationship between the army and society constructed in the public domain and creating a much more heightened sense of military responsibility by 1914. See N. de Mûelenaere, 'An Uphill Battle: Campaigning for the Militarization of Belgium, 1870 – 1914', *Journal of Belgian History*, vol. 42, no. 4 (2012), pp. 144-179.

had contracted a voluntary engagement over the last eight years.¹⁵⁴ This was only made slightly better by the additional 5,946 re-engagements from balloted men over the same time period, which brought the total proportion to roughly 19%. Despite seemingly poor from the outset, these figures were at the highest point that they were to attain for the remainder of the century. Thereafter, they began a slow, constant decline to the point where, by 1875, voluntary engagements accounted for no more than 5.4% of the establishment at a point when the army was nearing its reorganised size of 120,000 men (See Fig. 2.1). By 1860, the number of volunteers was only 81%

Figure. 2.1. Number of voluntary engagements by arm per year, 1851-1875.¹⁵⁵



of what it had been a decade previously, with the losses being disproportionately incurred by the various arms. Whereas the infantry was down by 12% and the engineers 15%, the artillery and cavalry had suffered some 28% and 35% losses in this area. This was probably on account of the longer engagements associated with these specialised

¹⁵⁴ Verbal Proceeds of the 1852 Recruitment Committee, p. 71 (hereafter Rec Comm 1852). These figures differ a fraction from those published in the Ministry of the Interior's Exposé 1860, Tome II, p. 437, which state that 9,448 men had contracted a voluntary engagement over the same period.

¹⁵⁵ Figures computed from data in Exposé 1860, Tome II, p. 436; and 1875, Tome I, pp. 378-379.

branches as well as the more limited promotion prospects afforded to NCOs in the smaller corps. Nor did this state of affairs improve by the turn of the century either, with one of the main reasons behind the low numbers of re-engagements throughout the army as whole being attributed to a few old NCOs blocking the system.¹⁵⁶

A combination of poor pay and conditions often disheartened those with a drive to carve a career out of the army, with the result being that the NCO cadres – which in theory ought to have emanated solely from volunteers – were well under establishment. Alexis Brialmont, Belgium's pre-eminent officer and military engineer of the nineteenth century, anonymously wrote in 1866 that the army suffered from having few old soldiers and few NCOs as a result of the conditions of service, which made it extremely difficult to retain those who had been successfully moulded by the completion of their first term of engagement.¹⁵⁷ Voluntary re-engagement was made all the more unappealing with the laws forbidding marriage without ministerial consent. Conversely, those men who were balloted could do so once in their sixth year of service. Had the general conditions, importance of the role, and the laws governing marriage been altered to mirror that of the French Army, Brialmont was in no doubt that cadres of good NCOs could have been formed from volunteers in Belgium as well.¹⁵⁸ As it was, convincing enough men to re-engage proved exceedingly difficult and forced the authorities to relax their policy of recruiting NCOs solely among volunteers.

One of the main problems with the re-engagement system was that men were not obliged to serve for a full eight years. In terms of offsetting wastage, the numbers obtained created a false impression. For example, the number of re-engagements among

¹⁵⁶ AER Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, S 2509/365, Memo: 'Le Volontariat', 1908.

¹⁵⁷ Un Officier Supérieur, *Réorganisation du Système Militaire de la Belgique* (Brussels, 1866), p. 27.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

volunteers between 1851 and 1860 numbered 5,751. However, if one were to calculate the total number of years taken up by voluntary re-engagements and then divide them by eight to get a rough figure of how many ‘full’ terms would have been served over the ensuing decade, the number falls dramatically from the 5,751 to a mere 2,255.¹⁵⁹ Similarly, between 1861 and 1870 there were 5,733 re-engagements, which boiled down to an effective strength of 2,021 men serving for eight years.¹⁶⁰ The same could be done for re-engagements from the other categories of recruit, but unfortunately the data was unavailable for this purpose. Nevertheless, it can safely be assumed that this figure would also be misleading and, together with the voluntary re-engagements, added only a fraction of the real value to the army than the bare numbers would suggest. In any case, it is plain to see that there was a clear deficit in volunteers over the decade, which is replicated in the data shown in Figure 2.1. Notwithstanding the loss in manpower itself, the spine of the army, in terms of the manpower pool from which to draw experienced NCOs, was consistently being drained as a result of a lack of legislation demanding a minimum re-engagement length in tune with the terms of service for the rest of the army. As such it was no wonder that re-engagements were unable to keep pace with promotions, pensions, death, desertion and discharge that consistently hacked away at the already small voluntary section of the army.

Following Prussian successes in 1866 and 1870, the debate surrounding volunteers in Belgium shifted towards whether or not to introduce them on a one-year basis with the sole purpose of filling the NCO and officer cadres of the now much sought after national reserve. These opinions were aired in the continuing wake of weakening voluntary enlistments, which barely averaged above 2,000 each year.¹⁶¹ The

¹⁵⁹ Exposé 1860, Tome II, p. 439.

¹⁶⁰ Exposé 1875, Tome I, p. 382.

¹⁶¹ Exposé 1900, Tome I, p. 405.

1866 Commission hoped to raise the annual contingent to 14,500 of which 2,000 men would be specifically destined for the national reserve, receiving only seven months training in the process.¹⁶² While it was supported from within the military establishment, certain politicians were worried about the social impact that their introduction might have. The Catholic Representative for Hasselt, Jean-Joseph Thonissen, actually an advocate of the system, claimed that the aristocratic nature that such a corps would attract, would be ‘repugnant’ to the majority of the population.¹⁶³ From a military point of view, this was precisely the class of intelligent recruit that would form the best cadre of NCOs. Indeed, the prerequisite to educate, clothe and equip oneself at one’s own expense would guarantee the social standing of the corps. Despite concerns over elitism, and others regarding whether or not they should count in the annual contingent or simply be recruited separately to fill in the gaps, the 1873 Commission voted in favour of the principle seventeen votes to one, with two abstentions.¹⁶⁴

While relying on volunteerism to provide the rank and file with a cadre of professional soldiers, Belgium’s primary system of recruitment was by ballot. The system had been brought to the area during the French occupation but had not been well adapted after independence to suit the requirements of the newly independent nation.

¹⁶² Commission set up to examine if the current organisation of the army responds to the necessities of national defence in 1866 (hereafter Comm 1866).

¹⁶³ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 13 May 1873.

¹⁶⁴ Verbal Proceeds of the Instituted by Royal Decree of 18 April 1871 to study the questions relative to the organisation of the army, published in 1873, 8th Meeting, 14 June 1871. (Hereafter Comm 1871); AER Malou Papers, 521, Report compiled by the Sub-Committee charged with presenting a Bill for the organisation of the army, 1871. It was decided that for the sake of equality, volunteers – one-year included – would still participate in the annual ballot once they reached the required age and would only be deducted from the communal quota if they picked a ‘bad’ number; otherwise simply being incorporated as a supplement to the establishment.

The authorities had failed to observe the industrial and demographic changes that were sweeping Belgium in the 1830s and 1840s and transforming it into one of the leading economically developed countries on a per capita basis in the world.¹⁶⁵ This led to the somewhat unfair and out-dated assignment of recruitment quotas – based on the total population of the entire province - for certain communities who no longer had the same manpower demographic as the Government's data indicated. Some communes with small active male populations found themselves heavily penalised and could see their entire workforce taken from them in one fell swoop, whilst other communes' industry and agriculture would remain largely unaffected. This was remedied in 1847 when the levy was to be based on new statistics and the proportion of the active male population instead.

Further changes over the century were made in an attempt to iron out some of the inequalities, such as redesigning quotas to be met at communal rather than provincial level as well as redefining the parameters of the registration lists for the draw to only include eligible men. This was done to prevent a skewing of the figures through failing to take into account the number of men eligible for exemptions, which significantly altered the proportions of the active male population made available to the army. It had not been unheard of for municipal authorities to deliberately undercount their population statistics in an attempt to soften the burden on their communities.¹⁶⁶ Endeavours by individuals to have their names illegally struck from the registration lists through feigning personal circumstances or injury in order to obtain an exemption, similarly undermined the workings of the system.

¹⁶⁵ Zolberg, 'Flemings and Walloons', pp. 194-199. This put Belgium in a group with the United States and Switzerland, which was second only to Britain.

¹⁶⁶ L. De Vos & E. Bastin, 'Du Tirage au Sort avec Faculté de Remplacement au Service Personnel: le Recrutement des Conscrits en Belgique de 1830 à 1914, une Question Militaire et Politique', *International Review of Military History*, no. 86 (2006), p. 42.

Exemptions took two forms; provisional and definitive. The former provided a year's respite for the man involved and was usually accorded for height deficiency, illness, status as a family's sole financial support, or a brother of someone already in active service, as well as a host of other minor categories, including its contentious extension to theology students. Definitive exemptions, on the other hand, were accorded largely to those with incurable illnesses or deformities that would clearly prevent them from ever carrying out their military duties to a sufficient standard. A reasonable number were also given to brothers of men who had completed their service, the caveat being that if they were discharged for ill conduct or desertion, for instance, their sibling, who had been granted a provisional exemption, would become liable to serve in the following year's contingent.¹⁶⁷ In this respect, the law was able to provide the army with the requisite number of troops while still providing societal reprieves to those in greatest need. However, the ease with which the system could be abused, along with the first signs of party-political preferentialism towards certain categories of men, were just some of the reasons why the ballot became increasingly viewed as unjust.

When the 1852 Recruitment Committee sat to discuss changes to the recruitment system, nothing was deemed particularly alarming. The only significant discussions concerned a few minor alterations to the provisional exemptions criteria that would provide the army with a greater manpower pool from which to draw. Beyond those of a military nature, only scant attention was paid to related social inconveniences. The laws of exemption were deemed satisfactory and continued to be used throughout the century. Total figures ebbed and flowed over the years, decreasing from a high of 17,391 in 1854 to an approximate average value of between 11,000 and

¹⁶⁷ *Exposé*, 1875, Tome I, pp. 383-399.

12,000 come the end of the century.¹⁶⁸ This was largely due to the significant decrease in provisional exemptions as a result of a series of attempts to carry out more strict physical examinations so as not to allow men to shirk their national duty as citizens. This was of paramount importance when the annual contingent was raised in 1869 to 12,000 men and then to 13,300 in 1883. With the population continually increasing, and as such the number of men registered as eligible for service along with it, it is clear that many of these measures put in place worked given that the overall number of exemptions decreased over the same period.

Whilst exemptions did not have a direct influence on the effective strength of the army, replacement and substitution certainly did. These two forms of monetary escape were a far greater problem, to the military authorities on disciplinary grounds, and the government on social grounds, than anything else. The difference between the two terms revolved around the status of the man coming in as a replacement. The fee payer, after having drawn a 'bad' number, would have a period of time ranging between three and six months to find a man aged 20 to 35 to take his place in the contingent for a sum of money, amounting in some cases, to an extraordinary 5,000 francs. After his replacement had completed eighteen months of service, the replaced could pay a further 150 florins (317 francs, 47 centimes) to absolve himself of any further responsibility for him.¹⁶⁹ Not paying this sum would see the replaced liable to find another replacement should his original desert or be discharged for any reason, or face the consequences of serving the remainder of the engagement himself. A replacement could also be a soldier in his eighth and final year of service. A substitution, on the other hand, involved one of two processes; either swapping one's low number with a high

¹⁶⁸ Figures calculated from data in *Exposé 1860*, Tome II, p. 411 *Exposé 1875*, Tome I, pp. 396-397; and *Exposé 1900*, Tome I, pp. 410-411.

¹⁶⁹ *Exposé 1860*, Tome II, p. 432.

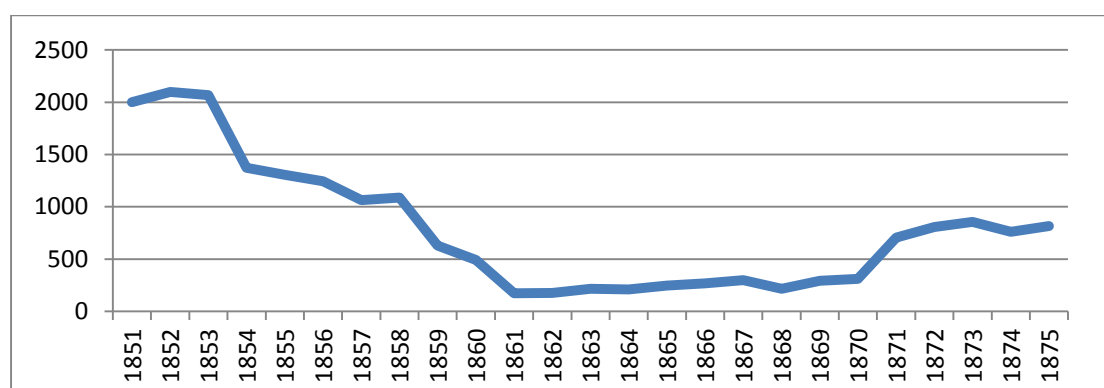
chance of being called up with someone who had a higher number and a lower chance, or simply swapping positions for a sum of money, generally much lower than that for a replacement, with a soldier in the 6th, 7th or 8th class (or year of service). This second option would see the newly incorporated man take the position of the soldier in the active reserve on indefinite leave for the remainder of the engagement, whilst the substitute would take up a new engagement of eight years, usually with a view to pursuing a career as an NCO. This was providing that the substitute was no older than forty-two and had taken up no more than one other re-engagement.¹⁷⁰

On the face of it, each transaction of this sort appeared to be a simple one-for-one transfer of status. However, it proved to be a real drain on the effective strength of the annual contingents (see Figure. 2.2). This was a result of a duplication of manpower stemming from the replacements furnished by the 8th class. Not only did they count in their original 8th class, which they had just left, but also in the most recent contingent into which they were incorporated as a substitute. Meanwhile, the man who had paid for this replacement returned home and did not count in either contingent, constituting a loss in manpower. Equally, though not in real figures, substitutions had the same effect, as the substitute passed from his 6th, 7th or 8th class into the new levy whilst the substituted took up the soldier's position in the reserve without any training or experience, rendering him useless to the army. These problems contributed to the unprecedented 29% shortfall in the wartime establishment that emerged upon mobilising the army in 1870.¹⁷¹ While it must be noted that some of the numbers presented in Figure. 2.2. were also a result of death, desertion and

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Comm 1871, 7th Meeting, 7 June 1871. There is a slight confusion over the exact figures with the 1871 Sub-Committee claiming that wastage had been as high as 31%, see AER Malou Papers, 521, Report compiled by the Sub-Committee charged with presenting a Bill for the organisation of the army, 1872. Similarly, a report by General

Figure. 2.2. Number of men under establishment per annual contingent, 1851-1875.¹⁷²



discharge (to be discussed in Chapter 3), it is evident that the replacement system accounted for a significant portion of the deficit, ranging from an annual low of 569 to a high of 1,668 during this period.¹⁷³ Naturally, returning deserters and latecomers offset some of these losses, but the effect of replacement on the establishment remains plain to see.

From a social point of view, the system of substitution and replacement was seen by many as despicable and a breach of the liberal ideals that formed the bedrock of the country. Certainly, as some in favour of retaining the status quo argued, all men were equal before the draw, each with the same chance, whether rich or poor, to be handed a ‘bad’ number; though the options available to both afterwards differed significantly. The average price for replacements furnished by independent agents varied between provinces but often amounted to well over 800 francs, which already outstripped the average annual salary (see Fig. 2.3.). This was even before the agents

Guillaume, the Minister of War, noted that only 72,613 men out of an expected 104,000 had presented themselves in 1870, constituting a deficit of 30%, see RA 2133, Report by Guillaume to Leopold II, 21 October 1871.

¹⁷² Data gathered from Exposé 1875, Tome I, pp. 397-399.

¹⁷³ Comm 1866, 10th Meeting, 30th March 1867.

themselves took their cut of proceedings, which at least doubled the initial price and did not take into

Figure. 2.3. Average up-front price of replacement by independent agents by province, 1861-1866.¹⁷⁴

<i>Province</i>	<i>1861</i>	<i>1863</i>	<i>1865</i>
<i>Antwerp</i>	691.76	682.18	694.05
<i>Brabant</i>	743.42	717.31	740.76
<i>West Flanders</i>	736.29	735.06	716.23
<i>East Flanders</i>	790.81	739.85	654.14
<i>Hainaut</i>	803.70	757.43	802.03
<i>Liège</i>	774.34	761.80	793.59
<i>Limbourg</i>	856.54	765.71	821.97
<i>Luxembourg</i>	899.00	795.45	857.36
<i>Namur</i>	819.66	766.87	796.62

account the often poor quality of man supplied. If rejected by the army, the replaced would have to pay for another replacement, or serve himself having lost a large sum of money in the process. Being unofficial, the agents and consortiums involved in this business could not be held accountable and were exclusively interested in monetary with a period of no more than four or five weeks to find a replacement before the contingent was officially incorporated. This very situation was summed up in Parliament in 1881 when it was noted that ‘the agents of replacement, seeing the sword

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., Report by the Sub-Committee, 20 March 1867.

of Damocles suspended over the heads of these men called up late, profit through formulating excessive claims.¹⁷⁵

From 1871, the Government, in its attempts to standardise replacement prices, sought to monopolise the market through legislation and by providing good quality men themselves, known later as *volontaires avec primes* (volunteers with bounty). This, it was hoped, would lead people away from the pitfalls of the unsavoury private sector and into the more regularised clutches of the authorities for the benefits of the purchaser. However, this smacked of governmental profiteering rather than the rectification of a social injustice. By instituting stringent medical committees designed to reject *direct* (private) replacements, the Government was forcing people to go to their officially backed *Société* for a fixed price of 1,700 francs. Indeed, the Liberal Frère-Orban, raised similar concerns during the militia law debate in 1873, with Brialmont noting,

He is [?] all unhappy at the new law, which will fatally lead to the abolition of replacement, because all of the proposed replacements will have to be examined and received by a commission, sitting in Brussels, composed of three soldiers and three civilians nominated by the King; a commission which will show itself to be, without a doubt, very severe.¹⁷⁶

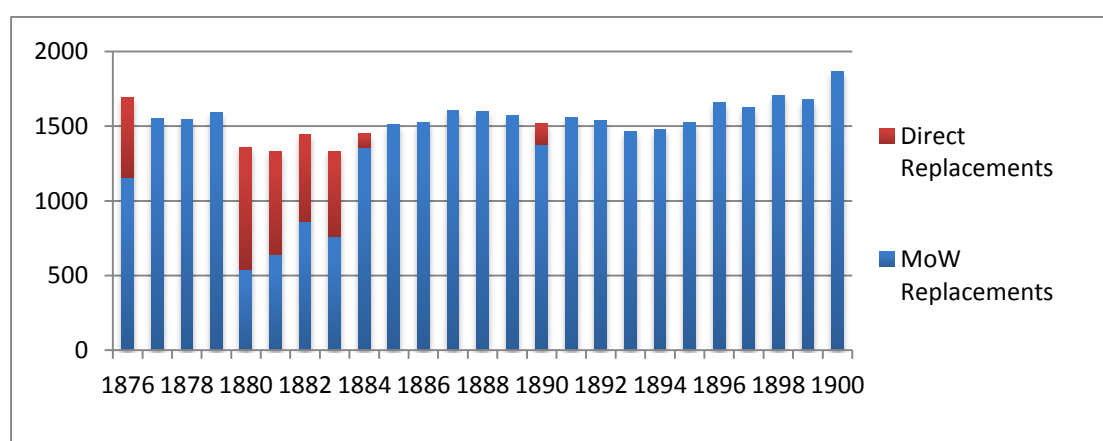
By monopolising the market, the Government only succeeded in inflating the prices of the private sector, particularly during times of high unemployment, whilst simultaneously taking on the responsibility of furnishing a large number of replacements themselves. However, this task often proved too great for them to handle.

¹⁷⁵ Plenum.be Chamber of Representative Debates, 21 December 1881.

¹⁷⁶ MRA, Chazal Papers, F. 18/700, Brialmont to Chazal, 28 June 1873.

Whilst appearing under varying guises beforehand, the 1873 Law became the accepted ruling by which officially furnished replacements could be obtained. This saw a change, whereby an initial 200-franc deposit, which would increase to no more than 1,800 francs upon being supplied with a man, became the basis upon which the system was run. No one was permitted to supply his own replacement through a private agency unless they had previously paid the deposit but had been unsuccessful in obtaining an official replacement by 1 October of each year. 1874 and 1875, for example, saw some 8,544 men subscribe to the Ministry of War's policy, though only 2,263 replacements were found. The rest had until the 1 January to find their own replacement or forfeit their deposit, which was put towards the administrative expenses of supplying men for this purpose. Only 1,023 of the remainder were successful in this attempt.¹⁷⁷ This was not a one off occurrence; the Ministry of War had a reputation of failing to generate a large enough pool to satisfy demand, though as Figure 2.4 shows, a significant improvement was made in this respect come the

Figure. 2.4. Numbers of direct and Ministry of War replacements furnished, 1876-1900.¹⁷⁸



¹⁷⁷ Exposé 1875, Tome I, p. 412.

¹⁷⁸ Data computed from Exposé 1900, Tome I, p. 414.

mid-1880s. The deficits experienced were mostly due to the fact that there simply were not enough volunteers willing to take the bounty offered to them by the retired officers employed by the state, working on a commission of 200 francs for each suitable recruit they obtained.

Despite the best intentions, this new regulated system did nothing to curb the abuses and social injustices that riled the public and politicians alike. Firstly, it did not eradicate the private sector agencies, which took great delight in inflating their prices to between 3,000 and 5,000 francs during the chaotic three-month scramble at the end of the year. Secondly, it created an uncomfortable situation whereby the lottery could once again be exceedingly cruel to the labouring and artisanal classes. As pointed out in the Chamber, hypothetically, a rich man could still escape service by paying a maximum of 1,800 francs if he was fortunate enough to be provided with a replacement. Were he not, it would mean paying what remained an affordable sum to an independent agent. However, a less wealthy man could find himself, not only without a replacement, but also without the means to obtain one through the private sector, resulting in the loss of his 200-franc deposit for no benefit whatsoever.¹⁷⁹ This is just one example of how the state fell short in its attempts to maintain an equitable and amenable relationship with the public over the question of military service.

Substitution, although initially only permitted between men of the same province, was a cheaper way of avoiding military service. Swapping numbers at the draw with another man from the same contingent could absolve someone completely of the burden. Although, even replacing a soldier in the 6th, 7th or 8th classes did not impinge too much on their time as they were only subject to a maximum of two one-month recalls. As a result of nominally having to serve for a few years, prices were

¹⁷⁹ Plenum.be. Chamber of Representatives Debates, 20 November 1873.

reduced by up to half in some provinces, though in others remained similar to that of replacement. Antwerp and the two Flanders boasted the lowest prices in 1865, for example, averaging 446 francs (Antwerp), 453 francs (East Flanders), and 529 francs (West Flanders) respectively.¹⁸⁰ It is no surprise therefore, to find that these three provinces headed the list of the highest rates of substitution during this time. Contrarily, they boasted the lowest figures for replacement. This was probably a result of financial difficulties often experienced by rural families in the two Flanders, especially following the famine of 1846, which decimated the region, as well as what can be called a provincial culture of replacement and substitution.

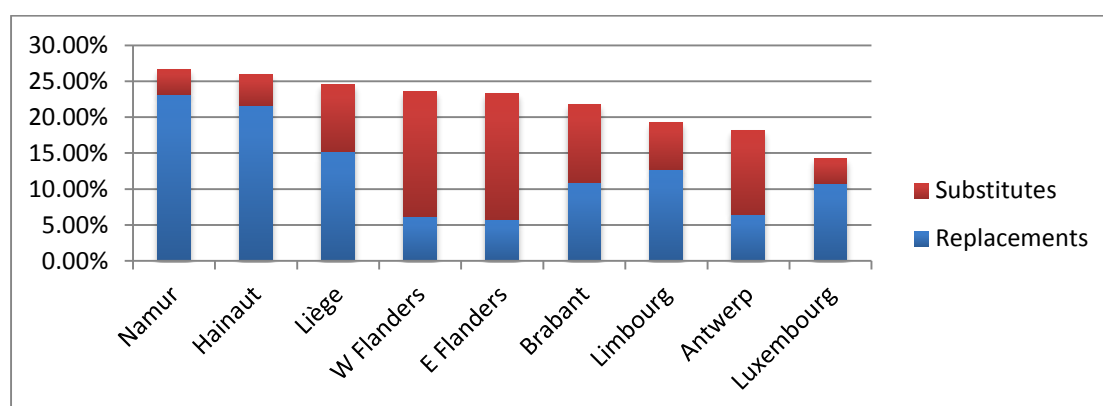
This culture was primarily a financial phenomenon, as with the two Flanders, which led to a majority of families affording and preferring one type of military escape over the other. This started a cycle that proved difficult to break, as replacements, for example, could not be substituted, or vice versa. Therefore, in a province such as Hainaut where replacement was particularly prevalent - forming up to 14.3% of their quota between 1842-1850 and rising to 21.6% in the ensuing decade – there were fewer soldiers in the 6th, 7th and 8th classes with the option to substitute with a member of the newest intake (Figure. 2.5).¹⁸¹ This subsequently meant that more men who wished to escape military service were forced to find a replacement instead, generating the next cycle of events. Over time, this also became embedded in the lives and customs of the villages, towns and communes where it was heavily practised, leading to the conclusion that this phenomenon became a genuine provincial military culture.

With replacement and substitution statistics demonstrating an increase in the decades leading up to the mid-1860s, it is little wonder that the 1866 Commission

¹⁸⁰ Comm 1866, Report by the Sub-Committee, 20 March 1867.

¹⁸¹ Exposé 1852.

Figure. 2.5. Percentage of replacements and substitutes by province, 1851-1860.¹⁸²



predicted the situation would escalate even more rapidly in years to come. In their opinion, the growth in public wealth, coupled with the introduction and expansion of insurance companies, made replacement all the more accessible to the previously out of touch middle and lower classes. For a mere annual charge of 50 francs for a period of six years, a family could insure their son at the *Compagnie des Rentiers*, for example, and be given a sum of between 1,500 and 1,800 francs to buy a replacement if and when the time came. This facilitation, the Commission felt, could create a situation where, by 1875, half the army would be composed of these ‘mercenaries’, the majority of whom originated from an ‘impure’ source of the population.¹⁸³ The army’s Divisional Commanders left the Commission in no doubt as to how they felt about this state of affairs either. Lieut-Gen. Désart of the 2nd Infantry Division commented that, ‘These men who, with but a few exceptions, hail from the lowest classes, constituting the leprosy of the army [...] are a veritable danger through the bad example that they set.’ Equally, General Jambers of the 3rd Infantry Division feared that, ‘replacement and substitution is depriving the army of elite soldiers who are replaced by vagabonds, taken

¹⁸² Data computed from Exposé 1860, Tome II, p. 412.

¹⁸³ Comm 1866, Report by the Sub-Committee, 20 March 1867; See also De Vos & Bastin, ‘Tirage au Sort’, p. 43.

from the depths of society. [...] it could compromise the very existence of the country.¹⁸⁴ Not only would the predicted increase in their number create an unprecedented problem for the maintenance of public order through an added influx of untrustworthy men (an increase of some 43% since the 1830s) but also in terms of general military discipline, which was sorely lacking among this category of recruit.

Indeed, as André Grisard put it in his work on the Belgian Army, ‘society was being defended by those who had nothing to defend’, leading to the conclusion that replacement and substitution were the root of the army’s disciplinary issues.¹⁸⁵ This topic will be broadened in the following chapter, but it is nevertheless worthwhile examining the effects of the ballot system on military discipline briefly here. Figures from the 1866 Commission’s Sub-Committee would certainly support Grisard’s view, which was held by many contemporary commentators of the time. They suggested that out of every hundred men who deserted, sixty-three were replacements and substitutes, nineteen were balloted conscripts, and eighteen were volunteers.¹⁸⁶ Equally, for every hundred men sent to the Disciplinary Companies, seventy-one were replacements and substitutes, fifteen were balloted conscripts, and fourteen were volunteers. Given that proportionally there were fewer replacements and substitutes in the army than balloted conscripts, it is clear to see that there is truth behind the assertion that they were among the primary causes of indiscipline in the army.

Given the general consensus that the recruiting system was both a social injustice as well as a reliable method of qualitatively weakening what was an already

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 20th Meeting, 2nd May 1867.

¹⁸⁵ A. Grisard: *Histoire de l’Armée Belge de 1830 à nos Jours. Tome I De 1830 à 1919* (Tournai, 1982), p. 151.

¹⁸⁶ All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from Comm 1866, Report by the Sub-Committee, 20 March 1867.

small army by European standards, it is unsurprising to find a number of attempts to institute significant military reform from the 1850s onwards. What is more surprising is that replacement and substitution were not abolished before 1909 despite seemingly common agreement among senior officers, many politicians across all parties, and the general population that it bore a number of glaring deficiencies. What occurred in the intervening half-century that prevented significant, if not vital, military reform from coming into being, was a heated political debate between the two leading parties of the nineteenth century; the Liberals and the Catholics. The army was the crucible in which an intense political struggle was fought out at the expense of introducing fully-blown conscription in the form of personal, obligatory and general service.

The Catholic Party, who had spent a number of years in opposition during the 1840s and 1850s were the first to use army reform to gain a political advantage. Opposition coupled with the rise of the clerical, anti-militarist, anti-royalist and pro-Flemish, *Meetings* who were encroaching upon traditional Catholic voters, brought the party together on the military question under the leadership of Jean-Baptiste Coomans. By the 1860s they began advocating voluntary recruitment and the abolition of replacement for the first time with the aim of winning back the votes of those opposed to the ‘blood tax’, which was felt particularly heavily in the rural communities of Flanders. This attempt at introducing a measure of social equality to the recruitment process allowed them to make some gains on the Liberal Party but defeat in the 1864 elections signalled a reversion to their former position on the matter as social issues returned to the fore.¹⁸⁷ Another defeat in the 1868 elections saw the Catholics take up issues over which they could directly oppose the Liberals and fight to secure wavering votes. These included electoral reform and the army once again. This time, however,

¹⁸⁷ De Vos & Bastin, ‘Tirage au Sort’, pp. 47-48.

their key policies were lowering the military budget and reducing the annual levy from 12,000 to 10,000 men, and by extension the burden on society.¹⁸⁸ From this point on, the Catholics were to be seen as the embodiment of anti-militaristic sentiment, relegating the importance of national defence whilst promoting the values of a clerical society who would want little, or nothing to do with the army. By adopting such an approach to the military question, the Catholics not only diametrically opposed themselves to the Liberals on the matter, but also, as a result, gravitated towards the *Meetings* of Antwerp.

This rapprochement, as will be discussed further on, would see the Catholic Party become closely linked with the rise of Flemish-consciousness within the army, which further complicated questions of reform as the century drew to a close. Correspondingly, by opposing themselves to the Liberals over military reform, the Catholics inadvertently increased the former's influence within military circles. As seen in Chapter 1, the majority of senior officers were of Liberal persuasion, which created significant tension in civil-military relations during the Catholic monopoly of power from 1884 until the outbreak of war. This was not to say that the Liberals sanctioned every military proposal for reform prior to losing power; far from it. They too were aware of anti-militaristic sentiment in the country and the fine line that they had to tread. This caused a situation whereby the army, intent on reforming to keep up with the evolution of European armies – particularly that of Prussia – after 1866 and 1870-71, found itself caught in a political crossfire that delayed the introduction of vital reforms in the half century leading up to the First World War. The abolition of

¹⁸⁸ C. Woeste, *Mémoires pour servir à l'Histoire Contemporaine de la Belgique 1859 – 1894*, Vol I (Brussels, 1927), p. 88.

replacement and the introduction of personal and obligatory service were foremost among these.

As early as 1859, however, many senior officers in the army who were acutely aware of the international situation and the precarious nature of Belgian neutrality were advocating military reform. They were of the opinion that neutrality was only as strong as the army upholding it and that the institution that they headed was simply not up to the task at hand. Indeed, each rise in European diplomatic tensions signalled renewed interest in the matter, not only internally but externally as well. Belgium's guarantor powers saw it as a right to know what state the army was in, given that the answer had a significant bearing on their own military preparations. In conjunction with the willing divulgence of information, observers also frequently visited the Kingdom to report on the state of its defences and its army's capabilities, which were often thought to be less than satisfactory.¹⁸⁹ There were often clear anxieties over Belgium's inability to provide a suitable deterrent. Indeed, Napoleon III threatened to send a French force into the Kingdom as a pre-emptive move against possible future Prussian aggression if Belgium did not strengthen both its forces and its Northern frontier.¹⁹⁰ It was threats such as these that served to intensify the resolve of senior officers to push through reforms in spite of general reluctance in the civilian domain that questioned the gravity of the situation.

In 1859, the man charged with fulfilling this brief was the Minister of War, General Pierre Emmanuel Félix Chazal, a naturalised Belgian of French birth with

¹⁸⁹ TNA, WO 33/15, Report of a professional tour by officers of the Royal Artillery in Sweden, the Netherlands and Belgium, in 1864; D.H. Thomas, 'The Use of the Scheldt in British Plans for the Defence of Belgian Neutrality, 1831 – 1914', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, vol. 41 (1963), pp. 562-567; D.H. Thomas, 'Neutral Belgium's divulgence of military information to its guarantors in the nineteenth century', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 24, no. 6 (1982), pp. 561-570.

¹⁹⁰ AER Rogier Papers, 416, Chazal to Rogier, 12 June 1859.

decidedly Liberal views. He had previously served in the same post in Charles Rogier's first Ministry between 1847 and 1852 and had acquitted himself well under the duress of the 1848 crisis, which had seen a Revolutionary force march on Brussels. This time, however, with the prospective threat being far less tangible and more hypothetical, he found the duties of his office increasingly challenging. His concerns over the state of the army were made evident in a letter to Rogier, which read;

We cannot improvise cadres, nor materiel, nor serious means of defence at the last moment; we cannot instruct an army in a few days. Given the present situation, time is already against us and there is not an hour to lose. In the end, when it comes to military measures, we need all or nothing.¹⁹¹

Chazal felt that the Premier could use his influence and standing within the Government to provoke the Council of Ministers into action regarding an increase in the military budget, without which there was nothing, as Minister of War, that he could do to improve the situation. If European tensions escalated and called for immediate Belgian action in which the army would prove itself inadequately prepared, he would be accused of not having taken the necessary measures. Conversely, if the international crisis passed without event, he would be reproached for over-spending, irrespective of how insufficient the military budget was thought to be.¹⁹² Chazal even considered threatening to tender his resignation were he not supported, claiming that he could and would not be held responsible for any consequences. As it was, he was not given the funds that he desired as the crisis passed by without producing the conflagration many were expecting. Chazal retained his office but was unhappy at the lack of opportunity afforded to do his job properly. The army remained in a poor state of health despite

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

warnings that another threatening situation could arise at any moment. It was clearly the civilian politicians, afraid of increasing the military burden on society, and particularly on the small tax-paying electorate, who had blocked the necessary reforms. The whole situation was symptomatic of civil-military relations in nineteenth century Belgium and would be reproduced on numerous subsequent occasions. Indeed, the next one arose less than a decade later.

The 1866 Commission set up to report on the state of the army published its findings the following year in the wake of the Austro-Prussian War, which had brought to light the positive effects of the Prussian military model. Among other things, the commission examined, and soon discarded, the mooted proposals for the introduction of voluntary recruitment that had been circulating on the grounds that it would not provide sufficient numbers for the task at hand. If anything the army needed to increase in size and, more to the point, the importance of a substantial reserve became paramount.¹⁹³ In order to do this, the annual levy would need to be raised to 14,500 men if replacement and substitution were maintained, due to their draining effect on the establishment. Were they to be abolished, the contingent would still require up to 13,000 men. As previously mentioned, however, it was intended that 2,000 of these recruits would form an immediate reserve force of volunteers, remaining under arms for a mere seven months only. The rest would remain under arms for a full 27 months despite protestations by certain civilian members of the committee that this was too heavy a burden to place on the population. Defending Catholic principles, Charles Vermeire, suggested reducing it to just 21 months.¹⁹⁴ The officers present rejected these notions. General Renard demonstrated that raising the annual contingent to just 13,000

¹⁹³ Comm 1866, 19th Meeting, 1 May 1867.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

would still create a proportionally lesser burden than that with which the population had to contend in 1840.¹⁹⁵ As such, all that remained was to abolish replacement and substitution. The method proposed to do this was that of exoneration before the draw. Those who wished to escape military service would pay a lump sum of 1,000 francs up front to the Government, which would supply a replacement if they still drew a bad number. The equivalent price for exoneration in France was 2,300 francs, demonstrating the relative ease with which Belgians could escape their military and social duties. Notwithstanding the adoption of this system by the committee, however, the Government could not see to its implementation for fear of losing political ground on its opponents. As such another opportunity to reorganise the army for the better was temporarily lost.

Despite further insistence by Chazal in 1866 that Belgium ought to take the same precautionary military measures as Spain, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, the government remained unmoved, preferring to be fiscally prudent and trust in the strength of neutrality. The Minister of War was irate, exclaiming in a letter to Rogier in May that ‘Events are becoming increasingly grave. Excited, Europe is already in arms!’¹⁹⁶ Once again he urged the Premier to use his influence in Cabinet to provide the army with funds to recover ground on decades’ worth of neglect, which had seen the army reduced to its bare minimum strength. For the second time in eight years, Chazal was close to tendering his resignation over the matter claiming once more that he would not be held responsible for the consequences.¹⁹⁷ For a second time, he was ignored by the government that was content to watch the 1866 tensions pass Belgium by. Indeed, it would take the Franco-Prussian War to propel the military debate into the

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ AER Rogier Papers, 414, Chazal to Rogier, 8 May 1866.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 20 June 1866.

public sphere with enough impetus to trigger an increased civilian appreciation of the country's precarious position.

The emphasis placed on military reform after 1870-71 leant, like the French, far more towards the introduction of conscription along the Prussian model, than it had done previously. Naturally, this coincided with renewed efforts to abolish replacement and substitution as well as the creation of a larger, more effective reserve. This demonstrated a defining shift from a Gallic influence in Belgian military affairs to a Germanic one. Not only did it completely transform the military, but also provided new impetus in the alteration of opinion among the country's anti-militaristic society.¹⁹⁸ It was clear to all concerned that the mobilisation of 1870 left much to be desired after producing a 29% deficit in the establishment. The authorities could only account for 22.5% of these absences, with 5% stemming from a natural shortfall in the annual contingents, 6.6% receiving definitive leave having married in their 8th, 9th and 10th year of service, and 10.9% as a result of becoming a family's sole support, as well as natural wastage from deaths and desertions. The remaining 6.5% were unaccounted for and were primarily found to be men who had changed residence without informing the local authorities, which meant that their recall had not reached them.¹⁹⁹ This demonstrated a huge organisational failing both at administrative level and within the army. Indeed, a large proportion of the justified absences were a result of the shortcomings in the ballot system and the general laws and structures governing the force. It posed questions, particularly given the devastating results witnessed in France, not just as to whether obligatory service should be introduced, but when. It became the opinion of many that this was the only way to rectify the obvious deficiencies in the current system whilst

¹⁹⁸ For a discussion of the militarisation of Belgian society after 1870 see, De Mûelenaere, 'An Uphill Battle', pp. 144-179.

¹⁹⁹ Comm 1871, 7th Meeting, 7 June 1871.

simultaneously reducing the public's burden through shortening the period of time under arms. The regaining of power by the Catholics in July of 1870 proved to be bad timing for the army, which once again struggled in vain to abolish replacement and introduce personal and obligatory military service, despite the visible threat to neutrality and the shambolic mobilisation of the country's forces.

The 1871 Commission set up to examine questions relative to the organisation of the army was unwavering in its opinion that Belgium should adopt the Prussian system of recruitment and abolish the ballot. Such transformations had occurred, or were in the process of happening, in the majority of European armies. As Brialmont rightly stated, 'far from leading other countries, we are, on the contrary, being led by them.'²⁰⁰ This was of course to be expected to a certain degree. Belgium was never going to be the leading innovator of military organisation given its status in Europe. However, it was the delay in the implementation of reform once it had proven successful in other armies that particularly irked senior officers like Brialmont. As the recruitment sub-committee highlighted, Belgium did possess the financial means and the manpower to do it. Indeed, the proposition to raise the contingent to 14,000, although increasing the burden on the current population from what it was used to, would still only see one man per 352 inhabitants pass through the army's ranks. This compared favourably with the majority of Europe in 1871-72. Austria raised one per 341 inhabitants; Italy one per 319; Denmark one per 317; the Northern Confederation one per 312; Wurttemberg one per 305; Bavaria one per 301; the Netherlands one per 299; Russia one per 250; France one per 233; and Switzerland one per 205. Additionally, whilst under Dutch occupation, the Belgian populace had had to contend with supplying one recruit for every 300 inhabitants, and even after independence, was

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 8th Meeting, 14 June 1871.

required to supply one per 366, which was not far removed from the proportions now being advocated.²⁰¹ It demonstrated to the military authorities how ruinous the increasing wealth of the country had been to the army in the promulgation of laxity among the population, its representatives, and their collective trust in the power of neutrality.

The report continued to stress the feasibility of introducing personal and obligatory service at the expense of replacement on a financial front too. This had been one of the main obstacles placed in its path by the government, which had pledged to reduce military expenditure. Notwithstanding, the committee produced figures that demonstrated how its introduction would see Belgium fall in line with the rest of Europe in this domain. Through 1870-71 European powers had spent the following on their armed forces by head of their respective total populations: France 14.03 francs (projected to rise to 17.92 following their post war reforms of 1872-73); the Netherlands 14.86; the German Northern Confederation 8.48; Bavaria 8.43; Russia 8.25; Austria 8.07; and Italy 8.04. Prospectively, Belgium would pay 9.65 francs per head of population, which was not absurd in the context of European spending.²⁰² Interestingly, the committee calculated that Britain spent as much as 20.75 francs per head of population to sustain its voluntarily recruited army. If ever the army had a means of quashing any renewed interest in adopting a similar system in Belgium, that most certainly was it.

Further discussion of this proposed expenditure revealed the opinion that, given the Kingdom's relative wealth compared to most other European states, proportionally Belgium would actually still be spending less on its army despite adopting personal and

²⁰¹ AER Malou Papers, 521, Report compiled by the Sub-Committee charged with presenting a Bill for the organisation of the army, 1872.

²⁰² Ibid.

obligatory service. 'Far from complaining about the increase in military spending, Belgium, contrarily, ought to rejoice over its financial situation which all other states envy,' it was stated.²⁰³ This was borne out by the fact that the military budget, which was due to rise to 46.5 million francs, from a state budget of 196 million francs, would be lower in both raw figures and proportionally than the average expenditure for the period 1830 – 1839 when it had been 50.5 million from an overall budget of 90.6 million francs.²⁰⁴ This comparison must be treated cautiously, however, as it must be remembered that Belgium was on a war footing for the entire period between 1830 and 1839, which does not make it particularly representative. Notwithstanding, the point being made was clear, and not without justification. There was no reason why, if the Prussian military model was deemed preferable from the point of view of national defence, Belgium could not afford to implement it.

The arguments in favour of raising the contingent and introducing personal and obligatory service appeared sound and beyond contestation. Even the future Catholic Premier, Jules Malou, attempted to gather clerical support for the initiative despite the Church's traditional opposition to military increases and the corruptive influence it had on the country's youth. Nevertheless, he managed to convince the powerful Archbishop of Mechelen to lend his weight to the initiative, which prompted the intractable members of the Right to follow suit, despite their obvious fury.²⁰⁵ This caused a veritable split in the party, but still the government of Barthélémy de Theux de Meylandt refused to sanction the committee's proposals. It appeared impossible to de Theux for the party to back down from its election promises, made whilst in opposition, to fight any increase to the budget or size of the army. He was particularly opposed to

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ MRA, Chazal Papers, F. 18/700, Brialmont to Chazal, 28 June 1873.

the idea of personal and obligatory service. This provoked an unsavoury atmosphere within the Cabinet, which was only made worse by the determined nature of the Minister of War, Henri Guillaume, to push through the 1871 Committee's proposals. A known Liberal sympathiser and staunch ally of the King, to whom he owed appointment to this office, Guillaume was resolute on the matter in the face of overwhelming adversity from his Cabinet colleagues. Indeed the Government went as far as threatening to resign over the issue if its hand were forced in accepting the introduction of conscription.²⁰⁶ Naturally, the King could not allow the Government to fall over an issue that he personally had supported. As such, it fell to Guillaume to take the decision to stand by his convictions and tender his own resignation in November 1872.

Guillaume was by no means made a scapegoat for the failure of the conscriptionist lobby to force through reform, far from it. If anything it galvanised its resolve in the wake of years of hard work and instilled a renewed drive in its cause. Indeed, the army's senior officers, who were determined to stand by their colleague, effectively went on strike through refusing to take up the portfolio of Minister of War. They were not prepared to see the qualified opinions of the commission cast aside merely as a ploy to save political face, whilst the army and national defence continued to suffer. This created an unprecedented situation whereby a civilian took up the post of Minister of War for the first time in the country's history. Four months passed before General Séraphin Thiebault agreed to step in on 25 March 1873. He was willing to temporarily drop the issue of personal service but was intent on instituting other military reforms. His main focus was to be a more regulated form of state replacement to curb the abuses of the system that had served the army so poorly over the past four decades, whilst also increasing the time under arms to thirty months. The latter was

²⁰⁶ Woeste, *Mémoires*, pp. 116-118; and De Vos & Bastin, 'Tirage au Sort', p. 51.

naturally opposed, but the former made some progress given its compliance with Catholic military policy. In all, the 1872-73 reform debate boiled down to a messy, though successful, defence of the replacement system by the government. In the furore surrounding the entire situation, the question of introducing conscription was actually somewhat relegated to the background and would not resurface, apart from a brief foray by General Auguste Goethals in 1878, in any significant fashion until 1886.²⁰⁷ For the time being, the Catholics had held the line.

This interregnum in the military debate was largely a result of the Liberal victory in the 1878 elections, which saw the political agendas of both parties shift dramatically towards education and social reform. By the time the Catholic Party regained power in 1884 under Jules Malou (for the second time), the lull in the military debate had ensured that their base of anti-militaristic voters was still in place. However, this political support was added to from the emerging middle-classes of the increasingly industrialised urban centres of the country. Typically, it had been the wealthy who had been able to avoid the burden of the ‘blood tax’, yet increasing individual wealth had propelled the *bourgeoisie* to a similar level of financial power to buy their way out as well. It was precisely this group of money-driven businessmen, content with nominally being enrolled in the Civic Guard as a demonstration of their patriotic service, whom the Catholics were able to rely on most against renewed proposals to abolish the ballot. Figures from De Vos’ analysis of Tielt would even widen the social composition of those able to benefit from replacement further, suggesting that 43% of those replaced were in industry (69% of these weavers), while the rest were made up of coopers, carpenters, smiths, butchers, tailors, and cobblers. On top of this, 35% were agricultural workers, 7% shopkeepers and merchants, and 15% in the services such as students and

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 121.

clerks. When examining his sample of fathers' occupations, it transpired that 54% were agricultural workers and 24% came from industry. The rest were made up by other occupations.²⁰⁸ As a result of such a large industrial and artisanal representation in the replacement marketplace, the importance of public opinion in urban areas became increasingly important. Whilst the Catholics had traditionally monopolised the support of the rural electorate, it is unsurprising to see them extend their influence in the commercial centre of Antwerp and gradually align themselves with the *Meetings* whose anti-militarism was exemplified in their slogan 'not one man, not one cannon more'.²⁰⁹

A series of workers' strikes in 1886 created an unexpected jolt within the Catholic ranks as well as the *bourgeoisie*. The dangers of having riotous masses supported by what was becoming an increasingly proletarian army almost propelled the middle classes to voluntarily send their sons into the army to defend their threatened interests. Previously unthinkable support for obligatory service now became, amongst some at least, almost a necessity to maintain trustworthy elements in the army. This shift in attitude saw the political situation surrounding compulsion become a veritable battle between the urban middle-classes and the anti-militaristic Flemish rural population supported by the city of Antwerp.²¹⁰ This fear of socialism was in fact the catalyst needed for some in the Catholic Party to take heed of the arguments put forward in the 1870s by the military advisors of the time. The Premier, Auguste Beernaert, was a known advocate of conscription after having been convinced by General Van der Smissen, who had amplified his reputation by personally leading the army to a successful quelling of the uprisings. It was reasoned that the army would not only

²⁰⁸ De Vos, *Het Effectief*, p. 61.

²⁰⁹ *L'Indépendance Belge*, 25 December 1912.

²¹⁰ De Vos, *Het Effectief*, pp. 230-252.

benefit from being a more accurate incarnation of the nation by expanding its composition to include all classes but, that in doing so, it would provide a buffer against the spread of socialism through an institutionalised common education amongst the youth of the nation to honour and respect the virtues of discipline, morality and duty.

²¹¹ This fell in line with the party's conservative views but the sudden shift in policy was certainly a fear-induced reactionary move. Nevertheless, opinion was not unanimous.

Some of the more extreme Catholics, as John Gooch rightly notes, did not wish to see the youth of Flanders become corrupted through any more interaction with their socialist Walloon counterparts than was strictly necessary and therefore consistently stalled its progress.²¹² This triggered a schism within the party which threatened the future of the Government. A number of local associations such as those of; Brussels, Roulers, Kortrijk, Tielt and Hasselt were proclaiming themselves as anti-conscriptionist and pressuring their representatives in parliament to follow suit. Indeed, they threatened to no longer elect anyone who did not share the same opinion and would not fight for the cause.²¹³ Beernaert called a meeting of the Catholic Party at the Hotel Mérode to discuss the division within the party. He had taken power on the back of promises to be supported in his endeavours as Prime Minister, which had now been broken. He particularly resented being dictated to by the associations, which resulted in a threat to resign. For the good of the party Beernaert was convinced to remain and lead the government but at the expense of temporarily dropping his personal designs to introduce conscription until at least after the next elections to avoid damaging support

²¹¹ Comm 1871, 3rd Meeting, 17 May 1871. Major Guillaume even expressed this feeling as early as 1852 stating that conscription placed the nation in the army, Rec Comm 1852, p. 27; and Brialmont: *Le Service Obligatoire*, Pp. 28-29.

²¹² Gooch, *Armies in Europe*, p. 127.

²¹³ Woeste, *Mémoires*, pp. 340-341.

in the rural heartlands.²¹⁴ The defeat significantly undermined Beernaert who, it was widely considered, had lost control of the party. His influence and standing had certainly fallen but inadvertently led to the acceptance of an increased military budget for the creation of the Meuse fortresses, as the Prime Minister could not be seen to suffer multiple defeats from within his own party.²¹⁵ This was yet another demonstration of how political pressure, this time from within a single party, proved detrimental to the implementation personal and obligatory service.

Despite this setback for the conscriptionists, the circumstances still appeared favourable for a renewed onslaught. The King turned to an independent, in the shape of Count Adrien d'Oultremont to take up the mantle in the wake of Beernaert's failure to garner enough governmental support. Founder of the National Independence Party and ex-Lieutenant-General of the Civic Guard, d'Oultremont was an ardent believer in the need to raise the effective strength of the army through obligatory service to cope with the modern age of mass armies. His appointment to the project was seen as the best way to bring both the divided Catholic Party and the Liberals together to discuss this question. There was a certain degree of cross-party agreement on the issue, though the question of what form conscription took and how best to implement it remained a source of debate. Indeed, Frère-Orban, for example, who had actually been a fierce critic of personal, obligatory and general service prior to the 1886 workers' strikes, was in favour of its introduction but wished to retain some form of replacement. This naturally encountered some opposition from d'Oultremont and senior officers who had been at pains to rid the army of the pernicious system for decades.

²¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 327 and 340-341.

²¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 358-359.

In the end the proposal centred on the introduction of personal service during peacetime, which would see every fit male take up arms at the age of twenty as part of one of two categories of men. The first would be a group of conscripts called up for an active engagement of three years and would consist of 18,000 men annually to form the basis of the regular army. The second category would involve men being trained for three months to a sufficient standard of military proficiency after which they too would be released back into civilian life to tend to the economical needs of the country. They would form a reserve corps to bring the peacetime regiments up to full war establishment upon mobilisation. It was thought that this method could succeed in both a military sense and be amenable to the general public by providing a means through which they could return to their civilian careers without a great inconvenience. In order to be agreeable to the Catholic sceptics, officials, magistrates and the clergy would be exempt from mobilisation. The military authorities were naturally supportive of the proposal and found increasingly strong allies in the recently converted Liberal ranks as the process wore on. Politically, it had offered a favourable opportunity to push forward a policy over which the Catholics were clearly divided, possibly enabling them to exploit the situation to their advantage. This was especially the case given that the Liberals had no real military policy of their own.²¹⁶ However, upon going to a vote in the Chamber it was defeated 69 (66 Catholic and 3 Independent) votes to 62. The majority of the opposition voters were representatives from the rural and Antwerp heartlands, demonstrating that they either believed more strongly in their political

²¹⁶ For more on this and the influence of the socialist movement in the form of the Belgian Workers Party's influence on politics and the military question, see M. Van Ginderachter, *Het rode vaderland: De vergeten geschiedenis van de communautaire spanningen in het Belgische socialisme voor WOI* (Lannoo, Tielt, 2005); and J. Godderis, 'Oorlog aan de oorlog!?' *De houding van de Belgische Werkliedenpartij ten aanzien van het leger 1885 – 1914* (Ph.D Thesis, University of Gent, 2004).

principles than in the danger of the International, or would rather take the risk of allowing the latter to go unchecked in order to protect their own from its perceived influences in the army. Either way, it demonstrates the power of regionalism in Belgian politics; an issue that would become an even more important element in the military debate as the century drew to a close.

Certainly, the deliberations on conscription in the 1880s stimulated a parallel discussion about the introduction of regional recruitment. Given that the proportion of Flemish soldiers was likely to increase to its national average of a two-thirds majority in the ranks, it seemed only right to the Flemish representatives to push for linguistically exclusive regiments to accommodate the influx. Yet, while it promised to improve the speed and efficiency of mobilisation, which was a desirable military outcome, it was quickly recognised to be ‘inadmissible’ on national grounds.²¹⁷ The lengthier concentration time of assembling men from across the country at regimental depots was considered worthwhile if it prevented unwarranted divisions between the Walloon and Flemish provinces. Linguistically segregated regiments would have undermined the army’s attempts at solidifying a unified national identity it purported to uphold.

Indeed, much like the Italians under Fanti in the 1860s, the Belgian army of the 1830s attempted to foster a sense of patriotism through national recruiting, drawing together men from different provinces and backgrounds into a large melting pot to counter the strong regional loyalties that had been visibly present in the Low Countries for centuries.²¹⁸ According to Richard Boijen, the early years were characterised by an air of acceptance from the Flemish population who saw the language laws of the army mirror those experienced in their everyday lives. A process of ‘Frenchification’ almost

²¹⁷ *L’Indépendance Belge*, 11 February 1900.

²¹⁸ For the Italian case see Gooch, *Army State and Society*, p. 10.

had them accept a position of second-rate citizens until the rise in prominence of the Flemish movement after the 1850s.²¹⁹ The Catholic Ministry of Pierre De Decker led one of the first public forays into idea of an awakening Flemish sentiment in 1856 when it instituted the Flemish Commission, which furnished a series of damning reports on the state of the nation and the army. Alexander. B. Murphy has argued that the report was not all that radical a document as it did not seek or even acknowledge separate geographical-linguistic regions, but rather promoted freedom of choice and bilingualism.²²⁰ This is true to a degree but conveniently overlooks the proposed introduction of regional recruitment for the first time in the history of the country. This is not insignificant. It was a proposal that was bidding to completely alter the organisation of the army and, more fundamentally, the role it had been asked to play as an instrument of nation building in what actually was recognised as a culturally, linguistically and geographically fractured country. This premise is supported by the likes of S. B. Clough in his study of Belgian nationalism, who argued that Flemish propaganda, between 1830 and 1870, although small in scale, took on the appearance of large nationalist movements with flags, songs and even a national anthem. The emergence of the symbolic Flemish Lion is indicative of this. Even the first Netherlandish Language and Literacy Congress held in Gent in 1849, the same year as the first Pan-Slav Congress in Prague, is suggestive of the progress that the concept of ethno-linguistic nationalism was making in Belgium as part of a wider European movement.²²¹ As such, there is evidence to suggest that the propositions made had a wider geo-political agenda, which both forged links between the Catholic Party and the

²¹⁹ R. Boijen, 'Het Leger als Smeltkroes', pp. 55-70.

²²⁰ Murphy, *The Regional Dynamics*, p. 67.

²²¹ S. B. Clough, *A History of the Flemish Movement in Belgium: A Study in Nationalism* (New York, 1986), pp. 74-78; Van Ginderachter, 'Ethnolinguistic Nationalism', pp. 1-13; and De Wever, 'Dutch-Speaking Belgians', p. 55.

subsequent struggle for Flemish linguistic recognition, as well as the first public admission of the ascendancy of regionalism over nationalism in the quest for identity within Belgium.

Language was the key issue at stake and the simplest differentiator between the two regions. Despite neither region possessing a uniformity of language, the use of standardised French by the ruling classes, Government and the army was a severe point of contention amongst Flemings. However, the grievances they expressed were not necessarily directed towards Wallonia as one might be tempted to suggest, but in fact against the French speaking bourgeoisie of Flanders, who themselves were seen as the oppressors.²²² Previously, there had been an acceptance for the need of a unifying language in the process of nation-building, demonstrating just how fundamental J. Lottrand's proposal, as the Flemish Commission's sub-committee's chairman, to institute unilingual regiments for both the Flemish and Walloon regions actually was. Notwithstanding, this was dismissed on two accounts. Firstly, Wellington had won the Battle of Waterloo with an army composed of four languages, and secondly it would undermine the attempts at forming the unified nation that was so desired. With the Liberals regaining power the following year under Charles Rogier, the Flemish question was almost entirely swept aside. The final report that was issued discarded all attempts at reform as a result of the wider national agenda, which it was felt that the country ought to pursue. Nevertheless, with the Flemish unity of language coming to fruition in the 1880s and the rise in power of the Catholics as the dominant political force supported by the extremist *Meetings*, it is unsurprising the *Flamingatism* (a term used to denote Flemish linguistic recognition) became inexorably linked with military reorganisation.

²²² Clough, *Flemish Movement*, p. 91.

Whilst regional differences were occupying the Catholics and Liberals in their struggle over personal service, a more serious threat to the established order was beginning to take root, which significantly influenced the military debate. The rise of socialism through the Belgian Workers' Party as of 1885 built on fears cultivated through a number of incidents that had threatened to undermine discipline in the army and derail plans for the introduction of personal, obligatory and general military service. Indeed, as early as the 1870s the authorities were wary of the influence of the International within the ranks of the armed forces, which was a particular concern for the Catholics. For example, Brialmont had reported to the 1871 Commission that the actions of several men at the training camp of Beverloo had to be greeted with 'severe measures' after it was found that they had staged political meetings and were also known to have attended some held by an association in the town. Added to this, two soldiers from a battalion recently moved to Verviers as an aid to the civil power in the face of a workers' strike had openly stated that they would not use their weapons on the crowd if ordered to do so by their officers.²²³ Furthermore in 1886, more than sixty men of the 3rd Line Regiment stationed in Gent were known to have participated in meetings in the *Vooruit*, the cultural centre of the city's labour movement. This prompted the Mayor of Gent, Mr Lippens, to call into question the loyalty of the regiment were it to be called upon in aid of the civil power. By considering it untrustworthy he would only have the city's Civic Guard at his disposal which, with its more bourgeois composition, was seen as more trustworthy.²²⁴ On the one hand, incidents such as these reinforced concerns over the compulsory extension of military service within conservative Catholic circles fearful of the corruptive effects they might

²²³ Comm 1873, 4th Meeting, 21 May 1871.

²²⁴ *Le Bien Public*, 5 June 1886; *Journal de Bruxelles*, 30 July 1886; and *Le Peuple* 2 August 1886.

have. Conversely, it revealed an emergence of a mass consciousness among men of military age whose service to the State, it was felt, ought to be rewarded with a political voice.

Many socialists were advocating the nation in arms as a viable alternative to recruitment by ballot. Georges Lorand was perhaps the most prominent supporter of the system, writing what he claimed to be a propaganda leaflet for it in 1889 entitled: *Nation Armée: Le Système Suisse*.²²⁵ As the title would suggest, Lorand was heavily inspired by the Swiss cantonal militia, which he personally observed at their manoeuvres in conducting the research for this work. He felt that the lack of knowledge, a result of an odd decision by the Belgian Government to never send an official military observer, had subsequently rendered the country unsympathetic to, and unappreciative of, the nation in arms as a possible solution to the problem of military organisation. It had the potential to answer to the nation's demands for shorter service, a much-reduced standing army, and abolition of the corruptive barracks, whilst arming a larger number of men than was currently the case. Detractors, such as Frère-Orban – who saw little difference between a conscript army and the nation in arms – as well as the majority of the Catholic Party and press, pointed to the way in which it went against Belgian traditions, morals and character, let alone the social, religious, industrial and agricultural requirements of the country.²²⁶ Yet it was precisely these latter elements that Lorand was convinced could be safeguarded through creating a national militia.

From the age of 16, his system would see boys learn the fundamentals of military life through education, gymnastics, marches, dress code, and shooting. This early exposure to discipline and routine would instil the basics into the male population

²²⁵ G. Lorand, *Nation Armée: le Système Suisse* (Brussels, 1889).

²²⁶ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 23 March 1893; and *Le Bien Public*, 22 February 1884.

who, at the age of twenty, would go on to form the first band of the army proper. Each year approximately 27,000 men would be expected to undertake a three-month training course, with those deemed to be inept returning for further instruction until proving satisfactory knowledge and capacity. A small group of full time officers and NCOs, who would form the spine of the army during peace, would undertake the task of exercising each year's recruits as well as the periods of 28 day recalls every two years. Men between the ages of 20 and 28 would form the 'regular army', with 29 to 32-year-olds acting as a reserve. Once over this age threshold, it was expected that all men would nominally serve in the Civic Guard until the age of 50. This would allow the population to retain their civilian roles and prospects whilst equally having received basic military training. In Lorand's own words, 'The army would be the nation itself and we will see develop in the public, for all things military, that same sympathy, that same enthusiasm that we find in Switzerland.'²²⁷ For those who shared the same political outlook, it was almost incomprehensible that the system was not put in place immediately. Not only did it keep the active male population in work and out of the corruptive clutches of the barracks but called for a defence of the country through a national collaboration of all men, regardless of social standing. By additionally eradicating the inequalities and anachronisms associated with the ballot system - ostensibly a relic of foreign domination - and simultaneously reducing to a minimum the time spent under arms, the entire principle married up with the political evolution of the time.

It is perhaps unsurprising that Lorand's proposals coincided with both the growing socialist movement in Belgium as well as the simultaneous debate on electoral reform and the extension of the franchise. Unequivocally, the nation in arms concept

²²⁷ Lorand, *Nation Armée*, p. 65.

contributed to both the military debate as well as the quest for universal suffrage. By asking the entire nation to embrace this new national dawn where each man with a right to vote would rise to defend the State in which he had a stake, it was felt that the nation in arms was the true corollary of universal suffrage; 'it [was] a duty as well as a right.'²²⁸ This was equally the view shared by the conscriptionists; to be an active citizen in the nation one must also be prepared to defend it as had been demonstrated in other European states.²²⁹ It was akin to an unwritten social contract that had its roots in the ballot system, but was being perfected to rid it of its vices.

As it was, electoral reform was passed in April 1893 but in the form of tempered universal suffrage that worked on a plural vote system. This saw 60% of the electoral body receive one vote, 23% two votes, and 17% three votes based on a combination of wealth, social and occupational status. The number of electors jumped from 135,000 to 1,370,687 and the number of votes to 2,111,127. Socialist votes soared and actually saw the party send eight more representatives to parliament than the Liberals after the 1894 election.²³⁰ This made their proposals of a nation in arms more authoritative and led to further pronouncements on the matter. Indeed, Émile Féron, the left-leaning Liberal from Brussels, continued extolling the virtues of the system in 1894 when he asserted: 'Those who wish to remain free must guard against an army which is not national; the army of a free people must be the incarnation of the said people.'²³¹

²²⁸ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 30 November 1911.

²²⁹ Strachan, *European Armies*, p. 69. In Italy, conscription was not adopted initially for fear of widening the political nation and becoming a threat to established order, whereas in Belgium it was the vote that came first. See Gooch, *Army, State and Society*, p. 1.

²³⁰ The 1894 election saw 900,000 Catholic votes elect 104 deputies, 300,000 Socialist votes elect 28 deputies, and 500,000 Liberal votes elect 20 deputies. See Clough, *Flemish Movement*, pp. 135-136.

²³¹ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 7 March 1894.

Notwithstanding, it was thought to be out of the realms of realistic possibility as its three bands of armed militia were considered too much for a small country such as Belgium.²³² Others placed their faith in Belgian neutrality, which up until the twentieth century had only come under serious threat once, during the Franco-Prussian War. Perhaps this is the reason why it was felt that minimal training would suffice, though it is difficult to believe that it would have constituted an effective fighting force against either of its two most likely aggressors, Germany or France. This is rather symptomatic of the entire debate regarding military reorganisation in Belgium. The attempt to balance the largely anti-militaristic public's desire with that of military efficiency led to a situation whereby Belgium was uncertain as to how it could best defend itself. Great faith was placed in the development of the fortress system (discussed in Chapter 5), but even this relied on strong regular cadres of men capable of sustaining defensive action long enough for foreign aid to arrive. While the nation in arms promised the numbers, it could not guarantee the quality that personal and obligatory service would offer. It appeared, therefore, as if a militia based on the Swiss system would fall dramatically short of what it would be asked to do in times of war. After all, Switzerland's main barrier of defence was not its nation in arms but its mountain ranges; something that the Belgian advocates ought to have more readily considered.

As it was, the entire military reorganisation debate boiled down to a political struggle, which allowed the successive anti-militarist and anti-royalist Catholic Governments to dictate affairs. Despite senior officers endlessly expressing their professional opinions in favour of obligatory service, there was no real sense that the politicians seriously contemplated its implantation. In 1897, Brialmont, once again

²³² *Journal de Bruxelles*, quoted in *Le Bien Public*, 22 February 1884.

spearheading the charge, felt compelled to set up a committee composed of five retired generals, two presidents of ex-NCOs associations, and the director of *La Belgique Militaire* to whom he proposed uniting over 250 veterans associations into one federation for a big propaganda campaign in favour of personal service. Writing to the King's secretary beforehand, Brialmont suggest that, 'Everything would suggest that this propaganda will rouse the slumbering patriotism of the nation and will present the King with the means to realise His good intentions towards the army.'²³³ In search for political capital they took a petition to the King on 13 June 1897 and gained verbal support for their endeavours with Leopold II stating: 'You are preaching to the converted...I am, and shall remain, the vanguard of us patriots.'²³⁴ This was naturally welcomed but had little effect on proceedings. Indeed, the effect of the monarch's own verbal campaign, which had been in full force ostensibly since his accession to the throne, can be seen through its lack of success.²³⁵ A full three decades of effort amounted to little as a result of his Congo project being held to ransom by the Catholics who refused to support it if Leopold attempted to exert undue influence on military matters.²³⁶ With his expansionist desires over-riding those of military reorganisation, the King, although a known supporter of conscription, was relegated to the position of a bystander with only occasional indirect involvement.

By 1901, enough pressure was being exerted on the Government to institute another commission to examine the question of recruitment in the army. The Premier, Paul de Smet de Naeyer, in his second term in office, was clearly in favour of blocking any renewed attempts at the introduction of personal service, which had once again

²³³ RA 2182, Brialmont to King's Secretary, 26 February 1897.

²³⁴ A. Brialmont, *Solution de la Question Militaire en Belgique* (Brussels, 1901), pp. 17-18.

²³⁵ MRA, Chazal Papers, F. 18/694, Brialmont to Chazal, 16 March 1873.

²³⁶ Woeste, *Mémoires*, pp. 315-316.

gathered pace in the late 1890s.²³⁷ In fact, he was a known advocate of voluntary recruitment that would see the party's main political base rejoice in avoiding military service. However, given the military presence on the commission's board, it was unlikely that any result other than a proposal for the introduction of personal service was going to emanate from its deliberations. In what was possibly the most overt attempt at political interference in the matter, de Smet de Naeyer called on three Catholic colleagues, Charles Woeste, Joris Helleputte, and Auguste Delbeke, to join the 1901 Commission in order to redress the balance. When Woeste declared his reservations about joining the commission for fear of experiencing a potentially damaging personal defeat, the Prime Minister simply stated: 'Well then, we can choose two-thirds or even three-quarters of politicians hostile to personal service [...] This way we will gain a year.'²³⁸ This was much more appealing to Woeste and his colleagues who promptly were added to the committee, which by its first session numbered twenty civilians amongst the military personnel, the majority of whom were known to be opponents of personal service.

The Commission discussed a number of proposals from both the military and civilian lobbies present. Curiously, the underlying theme of these discussions concerned forging a national spirit, which had been sorely lacking from the passive obedience inherent in the aged ballot system.²³⁹ Despite the opinion of Hymans and

²³⁷ The Minister of War, Jacques-Joseph Brassine, had actually tried to push conscription through twice whilst in office in 1894 and again in 1896 during which time the Catholic Party had been severely divided over a multitude of political issues. He even managed to get partial Church support for the matter but was initially rebuffed by the King who thought it imprudent to cause a storm before the 1896 elections. When he tried again later that year, his proposals were rejected, provoking yet another Ministerial resignation over the issue. See Woeste, *Mémoires* Vol. II, pp. 22-23; 64; and 97-103.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

²³⁹ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 18 May 1869.

others that '[a]n army of volunteers is an army outside the nation, an instrument of reaction and *coups d'État*', there were some who believed in the Belgian ideals of the liberty of vocations, which made voluntary recruitment the most amenable form of military service possible.²⁴⁰ For example, Jules de Soignie, the honorary director of the Hainaut Provincial Council, wrote in *Le Petit Messenger*: 'True Liberalism consists of respecting, and to allow as much as possible, individual liberty; liberty of professions is certainly one of the highest order.'²⁴¹ This was precisely the view shared by Hellepute on the committee who stated that from now on those who enlisted would do so by choice to carve out a respectable professional career from it: 'the soldier must live by his gun as the officer lives by his sword'. An outraged Brialmont rubbished this, writing in support of conscription: 'Wrong, the soldier, after a few months of service, puts down his gun and reclaims his spade, his pickaxe, his plane; the officer parts with his sword only at the hour of his retirement, whence he can no longer take up a productive profession.'²⁴² There was clearly an understanding amongst the conscriptionists that, even under the voluntary system, men would be sent on indefinite leave after a few months of training, rendering them no more effective than men would be under the system of personal service, and ensuring that there were now fewer of them too.

A discussion of the figures ought to have given a clear indication that unless the Government was prepared to significantly increase the military budget, which traditionally it had been reluctant to do, voluntary recruitment would be an abject failure. There was a somewhat ambitious belief that Belgium would be able to

²⁴⁰ Comm 1901, 17th Meeting, 28 April 1901; and *La Belgique Militaire*, 5 January 1902.

²⁴¹ *Le Petit Messenger*, 6 November 1901.

²⁴² Brialmont, *Solution*, pp. 23-24.

implement the system on a British financial scale without breaking the bank.²⁴³ However, given that Britain spent an average of 27.43 francs per head of population for her army and Belgium spent a mere eight – a full 2.80 francs under the national average spent annually by each Belgian on alcoholic beverages – it would require a sizeable monetary input to bring the establishment and quality of the force up to a meaningful standard.²⁴⁴ The overall increase to the budget was supposed to be in the region of 34,000,000 francs, though, to bring it up to the British levels, it would require an enormous input of 200,000,000 francs.²⁴⁵ The majority of the budget would naturally be to cover the increase in pay to attract men to the force. Some disagreed with these figures, stating that it would only require an increase of 7,600,000 francs but that 5,500,000 of that could be saved through reducing the number of administrative staff in the army. Belgium employed one administrator for every 228 men in the army, whilst Germany, for example, was functioning effectively with a proportion of one administrator for every 598 men.²⁴⁶ Nonetheless, it appeared to be an incredible investment into a system that had served Britain well for centuries though through performing a completely different role to the one envisioned for Belgium. Additionally, on the most recent occasion when it had been called into action, Britain's military organisation had been found to be severely wanting in the form of an inadequate reserve. This, for a continental army seeking to move rapidly from a peace to a war-footing and delay one of two European giants long enough to receive aid from a relieving force, was surely not the answer.

²⁴³ AER Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, S.2501/355, Note on the possibility of an army of volunteers. (Unknown date, c. 1901).

²⁴⁴ Comm 1901, 17th Meeting, 28 April 1901.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ AER Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, S.2501/355, Note on the possibility of an army of volunteers. (Unknown date, c. 1901).

The more reasonable proposition was that put forward by the military presence on the committee, namely the immediate implementation of personal and obligatory military service. The proposal included raising the annual contingent to 18,000 men in a bid to achieve a wartime establishment of 180,000, which was deemed both a realistic and necessary target by Major Victor Ducarne.²⁴⁷ Even some of the Catholic members of the committee began to subscribe to the idea. The Count de Mérode Westerloo, for example, stated that he would support personal service on the condition that the law exempted all members of the clergy and teachers.²⁴⁸ Even before such declarations by prominent Catholic members, the current of opinion was certainly running in favour of the conscriptionists, which prompted the trio of Woeste, Helleputte and Delbeke to attempt to save face and leave the 1901 Commission before it officially endorsed a policy with which they could not be associated. In a letter to the Minister of War on 20 February 1901 they stated that they would not take any responsibility for the consequences of the committee's impending decision.²⁴⁹ Worse still, constant haranguing by Woeste and others meant that the Government ignored the Commission's final verdict and proposals and instead went ahead and implemented voluntary recruitment, which aimed to provide a paltry 30,000 strong peacetime force to be supplemented by an annual levy if necessary, whilst enrolling all 18 to 30 year olds in the Civic Guard. Woeste had had a heavy hand in this by personally striking a deal with the Antwerp associations regarding the finer details of voluntary enlistment's implementation, which was later codified into law and accepted by the Chamber of Representatives on 24 January and the Senate on 20 March 1902.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ Comm 1901, 14th Meeting, 10 April 1901.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 17th Meeting, 28 April 1901.

²⁴⁹ AER Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, S.2505/360, Woeste, Helleputte, Delbeke to Cousebandt d'Alkemade, 20 February 1901.

²⁵⁰ Woeste, *Mémoires* Vol. II, p. 222; and De Vos & Bastin, 'Tirage au Sort', p. 55.

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

The Military Law voted by the Chamber of Representatives is a party-political endeavour, an attack against the army. Four words suffice to characterise it: The Antwerp Meetings Approve. The nation's interests are cynically being sacrificed by a party, who, to have any chance of retaining power, has judged it necessary to present itself *en bloc* before its voters ahead of next May.²⁵¹

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

The modified recruiting system, no longer faced with being seen as a burden on society, was able to lengthen its terms of engagement without arousing public consternation. Eight years with the colours and five in the reserve on decent pay and with a promise of a pensionable job upon completion of service was, according to the authorities, supposed to be an irresistible draw to the armed forces. As it was, it proved to be an abject failure. This was partly a result of the aforementioned increase in public wealth, which meant that military pay rates remained uncompetitive, but also due to a culture of anti-militarism of seventy years in the making.²⁵² Volunteers, as had been the case in the 1830-1902 period, proved difficult to come by but the implementation of

²⁵¹ *La Belgique Militaire*, 'L'Armée Sacrifiée aux Intérêts d'un Parti', 2 February 1902.

²⁵² Leclair, *L'Infanterie*, p. 65.

the new system was certainly not helped by the lack of enthusiasm shown by the army itself. Indeed, accusations of purposeful ill will were circulating.²⁵³ Reports were emanating from local districts that military authorities were doing everything in their power to prevent volunteers from enrolling. In Gent, for example, around eighty men were turned away for one reason or another, whilst those who enlisted after 10 October were being forced to wait an entire year to be incorporated with the next intake.²⁵⁴ In addition, wastage rates, which had been projected by some to amount to 5,507 men over the full 42,800-strength establishment, were proving to be correct. Generals Marchal and Boël noted respectively that, ‘In certain regiments, we are unable to constitute a presentable company, let alone a battalion’, and ‘the situation in the cavalry is most serious.’²⁵⁵ Foreign commentators also noted the detrimental effects that the period of voluntary recruiting had on the army. Upon observing the 1909 manoeuvres, Captain Drury, the French Military Attaché to Brussels, noted that: ‘The army is not at the height of the role events may oblige it play...if not innocuous, it can certainly be said to be of little danger to an invader.’²⁵⁶ Skeletal units and growing international tension stimulated renewed campaigns against the voluntary system in favour of conscription, despite arguments that the reaction was premature.

A large part of the expected success of the 1902 Law lay in the estimated desirability for the new professional soldier to re-engage beyond his first term of service. Given that re-engagements had already been relatively common among

²⁵³ J. Hellebaut, *Mémoires du Lieutenant Général Joseph Hellebaut: Ancien Ministre de la Guerre* (Groemaere, Brussels, 1933), p. 72.

²⁵⁴ *XXe Siècle*, 8 November 1902.

²⁵⁵ *La Belgique Militaire*, 5 January 1902. They equally demonstrated how, in addition to wastage, the fact that men were only required for 22 months service, the establishment over a two year period would see a deficit of 1,785 men.

²⁵⁶ A. Duchesne, ‘Appréciations françaises sur la valeur de l’armée belge et les perspectives de guerre de 1871 à 1914’, *Carnet de la Fourragère*, vol. 14, no. 3. (1961), pp. 188-189.

volunteers under the ballot system, albeit with exceptionally limited numbers, it was not an improbable assumption that the increased number of them, who were now better paid, would seek to follow suit. It was quite rightly suggested, therefore, not to judge the system until at least 1910 in order to fairly assess how well the system matured.²⁵⁷ This would allow the first batch of re-engagements to occur, which year on year would add strength in numbers to the annual intake of new volunteers. Yet, cracks began to appear beforehand that could not be ignored. Simply not enough volunteers were coming forward in the first instance, which all but made the debate over re-engagements irrelevant. It was being reported that proponents of the scheme in Parliament were well aware of the deficiencies emerging from early recruitment figures and were pressuring provincial committees to over-ride regimental doctors' decisions not to admit certain men on medical grounds in order to raise, albeit falsely, the number of volunteers joining the army.²⁵⁸ With such things happening it was plainly obvious that the experiment had not worked. Waiting for 1910 for the system to develop would have been a severe miscalculation of the threat posed by the international situation. To the delight of the conscriptionists, the inherently anti-militaristic society began to take note, as did some influential people in government.

François Schollaert succeeded Jules de Trooz as Prime Minister and leader of the Catholic Party following the latter's death in December 1907. He immediately solicited a review of the 1902 Law under the pretext of an agreement he had made with de Trooz to eventually be allowed to do this, which given the circumstances, was brought forward immediately. As Woeste noted in his memoirs, this was a dangerous move as the party was largely divided over the issue and could ill afford another rift in

²⁵⁷ *La Belgique Militaire*, 5 January 1908.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 28 March 1909.

the midst of continuous erosion of their majority in the Chamber of Representatives.²⁵⁹ A commission was set up in 1908 to look into the 1902 Law. All that it found was a slight decline in the peacetime effective strength, which had fallen from a desired 42,000 to 35,200 men; though this was seen as easily remedied.²⁶⁰ Schollaert called the members of the right together to discuss the military question. Some were in favour of personal service; others merely called for the abolition of replacement. For the most part though, they were keen to modify the 1902 Law. The proposal put forward of ‘one man, one family’ inspired by a failed newspaper campaign run by *Le Bien Public* appeared to grab both Schollaert and his Minister of War, Joseph Hellebaut. Both laid claim to the idea, which purported to rid recruitment of the injustices of replacement by calling on every family to contribute towards what would become an increased establishment on a short-service basis.²⁶¹ From Schollaert’s point of view, it was a good opportunity to distance himself from the 1902 Law, which he inherently disliked, whilst it provided Hellebaut, as a military man, to drive forward the cause of the conscriptionist lobby that had been ignored for too long.

Opposition from within the Catholic Party immediately emerged, largely as a result of the proposal to abolish replacement once more. How, it was argued, could equality be assured if families with only one son were compelled to supply the entirety of their working hands to the army, whilst other families with two, three or more children would escape with losing but a mere proportion?²⁶² Replacement had to stay in order to redress this imbalance. However, Schollaert was keen to make this project one of general service, which by the very nature of its totality would not permit

²⁵⁹ Woeste, *Mémoires* Vol. II, pp. 340-341.

²⁶⁰ AER De Broqueville Papers, 1510/37-291, Report by Etaliez, 21 October 1912.

²⁶¹ Woeste, *Mémoires*, Vol. II, p. 351; and Hellebaut, *Mémoires*, p. 85.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 357.

replacement to occur. Indeed, he even wanted to avoid having to set an annual quota for the contingent, hoping instead to exponentially feed off the fluctuations in the country's demographics. This was deemed unconstitutional and was blocked, despite the obvious need to bring the army up to strength. Projections for the 1910 contingent demonstrated that, despite having nominally 65,000 men of military age eligible, only 27,000 of these were eldest sons and liable to be called up under the new law. With exemption rates predicted to climb, the total number of men expected for incorporation was only 15,700, which was not significantly higher than it had been under the ballot system.²⁶³

In a bid to raise the prospective number of recruits, studies were undertaken to determine how many men could be made eligible for service by reducing the minimum height restrictions for the infantry from 155 centimetres (5'1") to 154. This was in spite of a general increase in the average height of recruits rising from 164 centimetres in the 1850s to 166 centimetres by 1900. Interestingly, the highest number of exemptions for failing to meet height requirements during this period hailed from East Flanders (16.28%), demonstrating the lasting effects of the 1846 famine on its youth in the ensuing decades. In general, though, the average weight of recruits similarly rose from 57.95 kilograms to 59.81 kilograms during the second half of the nineteenth century, which correlated with the general increase in wealth among the population. With an increased emphasis on the physical development within the army, such increases were clearly welcomed. However, the pressures of obtaining a suitable wartime establishment to provide a strong deterrent to its neighbours, forced a minor compromise on standards. Even though the result of reducing the minimum height by

²⁶³ AER Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, S.2509/365, Note on the 1909 Recruiting System [Date Unknown, probably 1909].

a single centimetre would produce an average gain of approximately 400 men per year, the necessity to swell the ranks of the army made such gains seem worthwhile.²⁶⁴

With future recruitment figures demonstrating the potential difficulties at generating a large enough army for the requirements of the current international situation, general conscription without faculty for replacement was deemed a necessity and required Schollaert to garner support from across the political divide in order to guarantee the Bill's safe passage through the Chamber. It was a personal victory for the Premier and his associates, as well as for the army, though it once again demonstrated the influence of politics, and particularly the extremist Catholic wing of the party, in military affairs that almost prevented this momentous step towards conscription proper to take place.

Famously, Leopold II signed the law introducing conscription, in the form of one son per family, on his deathbed in December 1909. It was to be his last official ratification and was somewhat fitting that it should have been this particular piece of legislation about which he felt so strongly and had campaigned, along with his generals, for so long. Schollaert was hailed by a multitude of supporters from around the country as a courageous nationalist, patriotic in every sense of the word, for having stuck to his convictions in the face of such adversity and finally, through his endeavour and relentless energy, to have delivered personal service. 'Vive le service personnel' ended one telegram of congratulations from the NCOs Veterans Society of Namur, whilst his friends in Léau were keen to express their gratitude for this very 'national' deed.²⁶⁵ One

²⁶⁴ Ibid., Note on the number of soldiers who are 154-155 centimetres in height. 1909; and Figures calculated from data in Exposé 1860, Tome II, p. 415; Exposé 1875, Tome I, pp. 611-612; and Exposé 1900, Tome I, pp. 418-420.

²⁶⁵ AER Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, S.2509/365, Telegrams to Schollaert from NCO Veterans Society of Namur, 15 November 1909; the Community of Léau, 25 November 1909; NCO Veterans Society and Brothers in Arms of Gembloux, 19 November 1909; Veterans Society of Knocke, 21 November 1909; Veterans Society of Jemappes, 21

letter of congratulations came from a factory owner and elector of three votes under the new plural system, which read:

You have rendered the Catholic Party a great service and as a result, your name will remain ingrained in the country's history for having dared to accomplish a just and necessary reform that was desired by the people and which will honour the Catholic Party and the entire country.²⁶⁶

Reaction from within the party itself was not as sympathetic and was still influenced by the fear that the majority of their electoral base would not back the decision. A few weeks prior to its ratification, the National Catholic League for the Reduction of Military Charges and the Extension of Volunteerism made a plea to all Catholics to join together to fight this evil, which they claimed was not only unjust but also unconstitutional. This association, with a membership of over 12,000, believed that it would only increase costs as well as personal charges. Members argued that forcing the eldest son of each family to take the heaviest of burdens was unfair, and questioned whether the ballot was not more equitable. 'For us, the only system sheltered from all criticism, the only one that conforms to the Catholic programme, is the abolition of any military constraint, that is to say 'volunteerism'. NIEMAND GEDWONGEN SOLDAAT', (no-one forced to soldier) was their call.²⁶⁷ This inference of a lack of unity within the party was also a bone of contention among extremist Catholics over whose heads, and against whose interests, Schollaert had acted. One irate letter sent in February 1910 exclaimed,

November 1909; and Royal Veterans Society of 1870 – 71 of Leuven, 21 November 1909.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., Anonymous Voter to Schollaert, 19 November 1909.

²⁶⁷ *La Belgique Militaire*, 26 September 1909.

It is because you promised to work towards the union [of the Party] that they placed their confidence in you. You have betrayed this confidence completely. You scorned the advice of a selfless politician in order to follow that of two upstarts. You are responsible for the greatest misfortune that can hit a Party: interfering with its unity.²⁶⁸

This brought into question the legitimacy of his continued leadership. Indeed, the consequences of their actions ultimately led to both Schollaert and Hellebaut's fall from office, albeit having rendered the country a great service in many eyes. It was left to the eminent Charles de Broqueville to undertake both roles and lead the Catholic Party beyond its divisions and the nation through the Great War.

Despite claims that the 1909 Law was supplying the army with enough men, having seen the annual contingent rise from 10,892 in 1904, to 14,892 in 1910 and even up to 19,083 in 1912, the situation described by serving officers in garrisons around the country was completely different.²⁶⁹ Fears that the wartime establishment would be severely depleted if the peacetime figure did not reach that of 45,500 men proposed by the 1901 Commission, were proving correct after Hellebaut contented himself with maintaining it at just 42,800. Projections for full-scale mobilisation revealed a large deficit to the tune of 44,000 men in total and would see fortress artillery companies, for example, reduced to a mere 500-600 men as opposed to the 1,060 nominally required.²⁷⁰ Notwithstanding the numerical issues, the qualitative aspect of military efficiency was questionable as well, following the decision to reduce the time spent under arms to a mere fifteen months. Similarly, both the 1911 and 1912 grand manoeuvres were

²⁶⁸ AER Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, S.2514/369, [Unknown Author] to Schollaert, 5 February 1910.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, S.2514/370, Report: The Military Question in 1914.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Collon to Helleputte, 29 November 1911.

cancelled, depriving the army of the all-important experience of large formation training.²⁷¹ ‘As such, this Minister, in not opposing with all his might, the inscription of 42,800 men in the Law, has failed in his duties,’ was the sentiment echoed by the majority of the army.²⁷² A heightened sense of urgency following the Agadir crisis and the ensuing press campaign run by *Le Soir* under the heading of ‘Are We Ready?’ produced a severe scrutiny of Hellebaut’s policies and apparent apathy towards building upon his 1909 project from all angles; even the clerical elements of government began to look towards general service as a result.²⁷³ From national hero to ‘mediocre administrator’ in the space of two years, the Minister of War soon became the conduit through which militaristic criticism flowed as a result of newly uncovered deficiencies in the armed forces. Had European tensions not been running as high as they were, and the awakening of Belgian militarism not occurred as a result of the perceived threat of imminent invasion, it is more than likely that Hellebaut would have been permitted to retain his post and allow the 1909 Law to mature. As it was, the army called for his head on grounds of incompetence, claiming that he had ‘betrayed the hopes of the army entrusted to him.’²⁷⁴ This prompted Albert Collon to implore Helleputte to see to his colleague’s resignation for the good of the country and national defence, regardless of the close personal friendship the two had developed during their work in realising the 1909 recruitment system reform.²⁷⁵

²⁷¹ *Belgique Militaire*, ‘Le Service Général en Belgique’, 15 June 1913.

²⁷² AER Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, S.2514/370, Collon to Helleputte, 29 November 1911.

²⁷³ *Le Soir* printed a series of articles entitled ‘Are We Ready?’ in 1911; and *Belgique Militaire*, ‘Le Service Général en Belgique’, 15 June 1913.

²⁷⁴ AER Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, S.2514/370, Collon to Helleputte, 29 November 1911.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Hellebaut resigned his post in November 1912 and was succeeded by De Broqueville, who had taken over the Premiership from Schollaert a year and a half earlier. Officers throughout the army were said to have rejoiced at the news and expected the new Minister of War to guide the army and the nation through the next series of vital military reforms necessary to repair the damage caused over the past decade, despite previous expressions of doubt over their necessity.²⁷⁶ De Broqueville proposed to broaden conscription to general service with a view to recruiting 33,000-35,000 men annually to create a force of 340,000 men by 1925. Although initially opposed by large sections of the Catholic Party, de Broqueville managed to guide the Bill through the Chamber of Representatives on 28 May 1913 by 103 votes to 62, and three weeks later through the Senate by 68 votes to 27. Much like Schollaert in 1909, the new Premier was hailed as a national hero for remaining strong in the face of adversity and delivering not only the long awaited introduction of personal, obligatory and general service, but also for not reducing the time spent under arms any further.²⁷⁷ There had been calls to lower it from the already inadequate 15 months to 12, with the Socialists even proposing to raise the annual levy to 50,000 in return for just six months with the colours.²⁷⁸ Nevertheless, such support from the Chamber, and particularly from within the Catholic Party, did not come without some form of corollary. Indeed, the guaranteed safe passage of the new law required mollifying it with linguistic and political equalities amongst officers as well as revisiting the question of regional recruitment to compensate for the increased numbers and proportion of Flemish soldiers expected to pass through the ranks.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., Collon to Helleputte, 24 February 1912; Hellebaut, *Mémoires*, pp. 97-98 & 102-103.

²⁷⁷ *Belgique Militaire*, 25 May 1913.

²⁷⁸ AER Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, S.2514/370, Report: The Military Question in 1914.

As previously noted, regional recruitment had re-appeared during the mid-1880s under the stewardship of the Minister of War, Pontus. His proposals were allegedly an attempt at reorganising the army to speed up mobilisation in the event of war, a sound endeavour that was supported by many, and not an attempt to appease the mounting pressure being exerted on the Government and the army to recognise emerging Flemish regionalism and uniformity of language.²⁷⁹ It prompted a debate in which all political factions attempted to exploit the situation to their own advantage. The Socialist, Georges Loarand, was quoted as saying, ‘We want regional recruitment, which will assure a faster mobilisation than our present system and that will have the added advantage of having officers understood by their men.’²⁸⁰ What he really meant was that he supported the view of having men stationed near their homes and out of the barracks as much as possible, as prescribed in his failed nation in arms concept. Equally, the *Flamingants* contributed by stating, ‘Here we want no more Walloon magistrates, nor Walloon officials, nor Walloon officers.’²⁸¹ This thrust straight at the heart of the issue that had become increasingly important on the political agenda of the extremist Catholics by the eve of the First World War.

It boiled down to a recognition by the State that it was losing, if not already had lost, the battle of regionalism over nationalism; an elongated narrative in which the army had largely failed in its task. National recruiting under the ballot, voluntary and one-son per family systems had largely failed to break familial or regional ties on a large enough scale to truly inculcate a wider sense of national identity into the young men that passed through the army’s ranks. The army as the ‘school of the nation’ had failed in its ploy to use language as a central pillar around which unity could be formed

²⁷⁹ *Belgique Militaire*, 29 August 1886.

²⁸⁰ *La Meuse*, 25 February 1889.

²⁸¹ *De Flamingant* quoted in *La Meuse*, 11 June 1892.

and if anything managed to further polarise the two linguistic communities. It threatened to strike a crushing blow to the idea of developing nationhood in a country that had long struggled to form a single identity. By instituting regional recruitment, the Government was admitting defeat in its attempted use of the army as a tool of nation-building, rather contenting itself with accepting multiple strands of identity within a single national institution. It was, according to *La Meuse*, the end of the nation as it had been known;

In effect, in a country where there is a veritable national unity, geographic unity, and moral unity, regional recruitment already presents certain difficulties, because there is a need for a sense of '*la grande patrie*' in the army, and regionalism makes the feeling of '*la petite patrie*', that is to say the province where each soldier has his familial roots, prevail. In Belgium, such a system would be even more dangerous: regional recruitment would see the creation of a Flemish army and a Walloon army; it would be military separation of Northern and Southern provinces, before the administrative and political separation.²⁸²

This was, perhaps, somewhat of an exaggeration. However, the ability of the army to function under the pretext of parallel conceptions of what it meant to be Belgian cannot be discarded. Calls for absolute separation of the provinces was practically non-existent but recognition of a fully-fledged Flemish community within its own territory as part of a wider Belgian nation was apparent by 1914.²⁸³ Regional recruitment did not weaken the desire of all to fight for King and country, it merely recognised the emergence of different conceptions of Belgian nationality.

²⁸² *La Meuse*, 5 January 1913.

²⁸³ De Wever, 'Dutch-Speaking Belgians', p. 60.

When introduced, regional recruitment was not a perfectly refined system and still saw a number of regiments recruit from multiple regions. The cavalry for instance was deliberately left to recruit nationally, incorporating precisely 7.11% of each region's levy in order to be assured of obtaining the best possible recruits. Broadly defined, however, the infantry were to recruit from a single region with recourse to neighbouring regions of the same language. This was on account of regiments not having their roots in the local communities such as in Britain, for instance, rather having always been nomadic in their garrison duties for the best part of eight decades. As much as possible, regiments based in large urban centres such as Antwerp, Brussels, Charleroi, Liège and Namur were to recruit men from the surrounding area. This resulted in a number of regiments becoming entirely exclusive of some provinces. For example, not a single man from Limbourg, Luxembourg and Namur was furnished for the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th Line Regiments, whilst the above three provinces as well as Antwerp and Liège equally did not supply a single man to the three regiments of Chasseurs à Pied.²⁸⁴ Similarly, 43.2% of men from West Flanders were sent to the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Line Regiments, garrisoned in Gent, Oostende and Bruges and 37.1% to the three Chasseurs à Pied regiments, the Grenadiers and the Carabiniers. This meant that 80.3% of West Flanders' manpower contribution was destined for the infantry, purely as a result of the geographical location of certain regiments' depots at the time of the system's introduction. Contrarily, Namur would only see 60.43% of its men detailed for this arm, spread across the 8th, 9th, 10th and 13th Line Regiments as well as the Grenadiers.²⁸⁵ As such, it is evident that the rudimentary principles of regional recruitment were in place, though the coming of war a year after its implementation

²⁸⁴ *Belgique Militaire*, 8 June 1913.

²⁸⁵ Hainaut would also see 79.65% of its contingent spread across all the infantry regiments, except the 10th, 11th, 12th and 14th. *Ibid.*

would prevent it from reaching its full effect. As such, few conclusions can be drawn as to its long-term influence on the widening regional rift in pre-war Belgium. What it does demonstrate, however, is the power of the political lobby, particularly the *Meetings* and extremist Catholics, in moulding military reform to fit their policies. Naturally, general service did not meet their wishes, but to have the blow softened by linguistic laws and regional recruitment is testament to their continued influence within the machinery of Government.

From the moment Belgium gained its independence in 1830, the army struggled to balance the multi-faceted mantle of being an efficient military force, as well as an institution embodying the social ideals and national identity of the Kingdom. The ballot system upon which its recruitment was based for over 70 years was the chief reason behind its failure to satisfactorily achieve any of the above. Yet its prolongation stemmed chiefly from the political battle between the Catholics and Liberals who feared alienating a deeply anti-militaristic society and electorate. Initially the wealthy, but increasingly the *petit bourgeoisie*, were able to buy their way out of military service through replacement and leave the burden of the 'blood tax' to the less fortunate. This deprived the army of its best recruits while simultaneously breeding an environment of hostility towards reform that might reverse the comfortable situation the minority had inherited. Not until mobilisation in 1870 were the deficiencies of the system truly exposed, though it took until the social unrest of the mid-1880s to initiate a current of reform that ultimately led to the changes of the twentieth century.

Despite proposals from the emerging Left to create a 'nation in arms' militia, which would see the burden of military service spread equally across the population, albeit for just six months, opinion was firmly moving towards conscription without

faculty for replacement. In both cases, the right to vote was seen as the corollary for military service in an unwritten social contract between the individual and the State. Yet further political interference rejected the 1901 Commission's report and opted for the introduction of a less burdensome, but more militarily ineffective, voluntary recruitment system that left the army dangerously short of men. The fallout resulted in dividing the Catholic Party, whose leaders were convinced enough of the dangers of the European situation to solicit discussions about conscription, which went against decades' worth of military policy and electoral promises. The result was a one son per family system, introduced in 1909 that proved to be the stepping-stone to full conscription in 1913. While it finally rid the country of a heinous social injustice that brought the army further into line with its liberal ideals, it was arguably too late. The nation that was supposed to be unified through this institution had seen its linguistic, geographical and cultural division widen over the preceding half century. National recruitment, which remained in force until 1913, had not successfully broken the regional and familial bonds of the individual, who remained wedded to a different concept of identification to the nation than his fellow soldier. This admission, exemplified through the introduction of regional recruitment, was seen in as quarters as having a 'deplorable influence [...] in a country in such great need of fusion such as our own'.²⁸⁶ Certainly, while the army might be shown to have failed in this task, arguably the greater negative effect was caused by the political wrangling that delayed vital reforms before it was too late. Ultimately, the army that went to war in 1914 did so with pride, albeit in too few numbers to significantly make a difference.

²⁸⁶ *La Meuse*, 5 July 1907.

Chapter 3 - The School of the Nation

Regardless of the debates surrounding its changeable organisation, efficiency and role, the army remained a constant in the lives of the population who were under obligation to fill its ranks on an annual basis. Families across the country were compelled to give up the youth of the nation to the state whilst at the peak of productivity, in order to defend a concept of neutrality that was already safeguarded by the 1839 Treaty of London. Independence and internal law and order were only intermittently threatened prior to 1914 by a flurry of activity in 1848 and the rise of socialism in the 1880s, creating a situation whereby local interests were seemingly being supplanted by a non-existent national emergency. The burden of military service, therefore, often felt disproportionate to the impact it had on those directly and indirectly affected, developing - or rather, continuing – an entrenched anti-militarism that pervaded Belgian society. To assimilate these conflicting views, it was imperative that the army play a more socially constructive role than merely provide a force for national defence. In essence, as an institution through which a large proportion of the population would pass, the army was to be a ‘school of the nation’.²⁸⁷ It established a veritable unwritten social contract between localities and State, demanding an acceptance of citizenly duty from the former in return for assurances that they would be well cared for, and even returned better prepared to resume civilian life. More importantly for the State, in a similar vein to Revolutionary France, it provided an opportunity to foster a more uniform sense of national identity by breaking local and regional bonds among the youthful body that passed through the ranks.²⁸⁸ Whilst the population could do little

²⁸⁷ Hoegaerts, ‘Benevolent Fathers’, p. 78.

²⁸⁸ Forrest, ‘*La patrie*’, pp. 25-30.

to avoid the charge of annual levies, the State certainly defaulted on a number of its duties in this reciprocal relationship.

Despite being in the interests of the army to educate, moralise and protect the men entrusted to it for the sake of discipline and efficiency, insufficient care was taken to promote adequate facilities in which satisfactory results could be achieved. Indeed, barrack conditions were deplorable to the extent of incapacitating a significant proportion of men through disease, and in extreme cases, caused a number of deaths. This was made all the more probable through the interaction of the innocent with the malicious elements in the barracks who encouraged the defacing of moral values and discipline to the point of ruining many a future prospect. Spiritual guidance to counter this was demanded by parents as well as the Catholic Party, though opposition from the Liberals consistently sought to limit religious influence in the army. A perceived lack of education as a result of clerical schooling in Flanders initiated a debate into the root-causes of indiscipline, which drew renewed focus on the authorities' failings. Not only were there accusations of linguistic discrimination, which did little to demonstrate that a national identity was being established, but also reports of arbitrary and often degrading punishments sat uneasily with the increasingly 'humanitarian' concept of discipline spreading across Europe in the nineteenth century. In Belgium's case specifically, severe discipline in a balloted army did not endear military service to the population, who became increasingly disillusioned with the State's apparent unwillingness to adhere to its side of the bargain, which ultimately distanced the army from society to detrimental effect.

Prior to the Law of 27 June 1875, when the State took monetary control and responsibility for the lodging of its troops, the burden of billeting men was placed

squarely on a small number of communities around the country. At their own expense, towns and villages had to provide beds for soldiers passing through from garrison to garrison, or in the case of Beverloo, provide additional accommodation on an annual basis during camp. The fear of standing armies as the foundations of despotism had long been felt throughout Belgium and meant that the charge of providing rooms in private houses or communal buildings was all the more unwelcome. The people in the Beverloo area, for example, petitioned the Government for decades to have the encumbrance lifted as the army was always in search of billets during the harvest season, creating an inconvenience that went above and beyond what ought to have been expected of a community.²⁸⁹ There were those who argued that the populations of these barrack towns reaped the economic rewards of having soldiers staying in the vicinity, though it was pointed out that not all towns shared this burden and even if they renounced the benefits they could not escape the charge.²⁹⁰ Whilst noting that the contracts between the State and the municipal authorities only granted minor indemnities for their troubles, it is easy to see how towns lost interest in the situation and allowed many of their barrack buildings to fall into a deplorable state of disrepair.

At the same time as Sidney Herbert presided over a commission examining the state of hygiene in British barracks in 1859-60, the results of a similar inquiry in Belgium by the High Council of Hygiene found that it was generally in large cities that the worst lodgings were found.²⁹¹ In fact, two barracks, a hospital and the *École Militaire* in Brussels left so much to be desired hygienically that they were

²⁸⁹ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 15 March 1845.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 16 February 1854.

²⁹¹ For the British case, see Spiers, *Army and Society*, pp. 158-159. For more recent work on the general state of British military health, see E. Wald, *Vice in the Barracks: Medicine, the Military and the Making of Colonial India 1780-1868* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014).

recommended for demolition with a view to having them re-established elsewhere.²⁹² Not only would this be beneficial for the soldiers who inhabited them but it would also spark a partial redevelopment of the city through cleaning up residential areas and creating the space for improved road networks. In this way, the army could heavily impact upon the cultural phenomenon of urban regeneration. Further reports of degenerative barrack conditions from other areas of the country were also brought to the attention of the public. Disgust was expressed at the seeming impossibility of the Government taking control of the situation and instituting a large-scale modernising project for the benefit of the balloted men whom the nation was entrusting to the State. Damning indictments of the situation compared barrack conditions to civilian prisons, claiming that if a traveller visited any city in Belgium and looked upon a grand edifice, his immediate thought would be that it must be the latter when it ought to have been the former.²⁹³

These proposed regeneration projects were not always followed through or took many years to complete. Even following the State's reclaiming of all local barracks in 1875, steps towards improving conditions were far from adequate, despite a proposed total investment of 50,000,000 francs. One newspaper correspondent in Namur described the barracks there as 'filthy and dilapidated. They are but small rooms, with low ceilings and miniscule windows, most of them lacking roof tiles. Like us, the officers are indignant about the state of affairs and declare that it is an act of inhumanity to cram into these holes hundreds of brave men.'²⁹⁴ Despite respecting this social duty to improve conditions and 'treat the children of the people as we would like our own children to be treated', as one member of the Chamber put it, intense scrutiny of the

²⁹² Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 24 May 1860.

²⁹³ Ibid., 29 January 1868.

²⁹⁴ *Journal d'Ypres*, 12 September 1883.

finances was not unexpected.²⁹⁵ Each new building was supposed to cost 900 francs per infantryman, 1,200 francs per cavalryman and his horse, and 1,500 for an artilleryman, his horse and equipment. However, concerns were raised that these figures were being surpassed through extravagances, prompting a Representative to accurately note that:

Clearly, the common soldier does not care about the artistic shaping of the pediments, the porticos, or the windows of the barracks; he is less than moderately interested by the festoons and the astragali, or the other architectural ornaments. When a soldier enters into the barracks, his most pressing concern is simply to know when he gets to leave.²⁹⁶

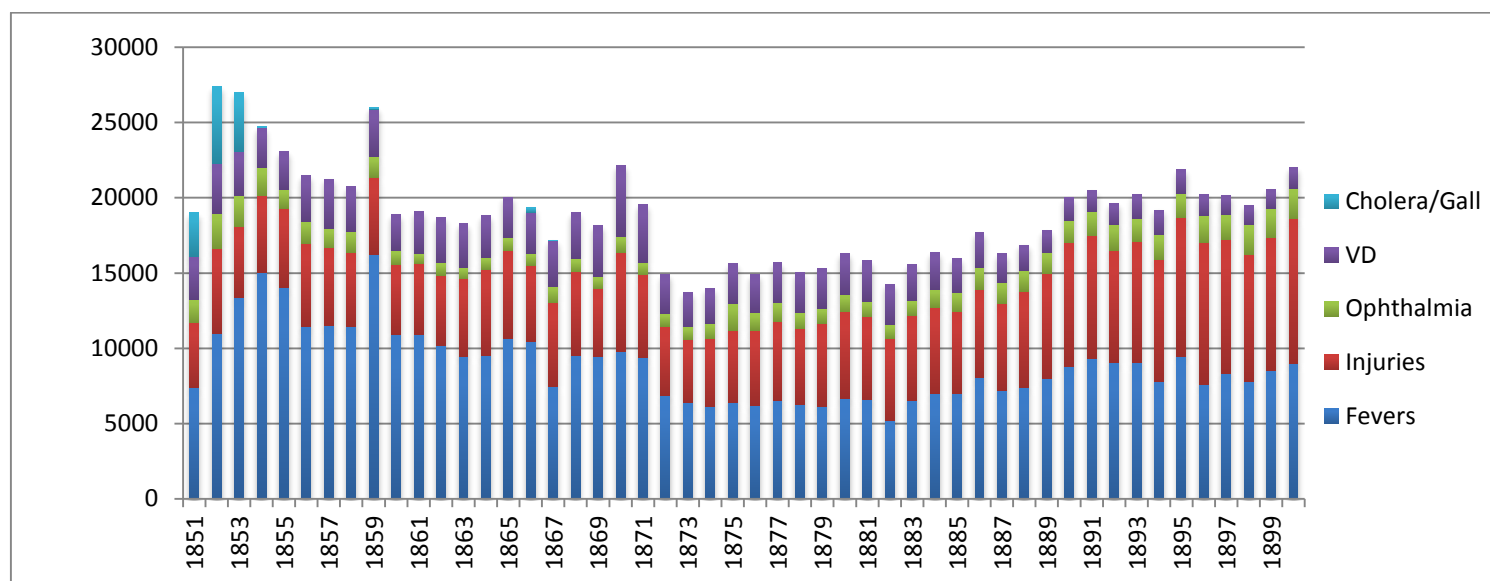
This theory was later borne out by the fact that the Government was forced to vote further credits in 1895 to improve the still substandard hygienic conditions found in a number of military establishments.

An examination of the Ministry of the Interior's statistics concerning the state of health of the army clearly reveals the difficulties faced by the authorities to gain control of the hygienic issues dominating barrack life. Figure 3.1 demonstrates the slow rise in cases admitted to military hospitals over the latter half of the century, despite having made improvements following demobilisation after the Franco-Prussian War. Notable reductions in fevers and venereal disease were counter-balanced with increases of almost 100% in injuries and ophthalmic infections over the same period of time. This resulted in a net increase in hospital admissions by 2,905 over the five decades examined and by 8,318 from its lowest point in 1873. However, this latter point can largely be explained by the increases in the annual contingent from 1869 taken to 12,000 and then again in 1885 raised to 13,300, which took ten years to fully make their

²⁹⁵ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 29 January 1878.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 12 March 1879.

Figure. 3.1. Number of annual hospital admissions in the army, 1851-1900.²⁹⁷



respective marks on the overall establishment. The peak in admissions witnessed between 1870 and 1872 are a natural result of having the army mobilised and on campaign, providing an unusual set of circumstances for which it was neither used nor prepared. Cholera is conspicuous by its absence, barring the exceptional outbreak in 1866/67, though an examination of correspondence between the Inspector General of the Medical Service and the Minister of War in the 1840s and 1850s suggests that this was not always the case. Between July 1848 and September 1851, for example, 1,060 cases, resulting in 400 deaths, were reported across 19 garrisons.²⁹⁸ This was generally caused, like many other diseases, by the severe overcrowding of barracks. They were

²⁹⁷ Figures computed from data in *Exposé 1860*, Tome II, pp. 474-475; 1875, Tome I, pp. 446-447; and 1900, Tome I, pp. 448-449.

²⁹⁸ MRA, Fonds Service de Santé (hereafter Medical Service), 10/1-85, Quantitative state of soldiers to have contracted cholera from 29 July 1848 - 1 December 1849 by Inspector General of the Medical Service, Vleminckx; and Medical Service 10/1-308, Quantitative state of soldiers to have contracted cholera from 7 January 1850 - 14 September 1851. Report by Chief Doctor to Minister of War.

regretfully unsanitary establishments that added further health risks to what was already seen as a deplorable occupation by most.²⁹⁹

Despite the general increase in the number of hospital admissions over this period, the total numbers of days in treatment declined with improvements in medical practice that, to some degree, masked many of the glaring hygienic problems that still plagued the army. The same Ministry of the Interior data demonstrated that illnesses were cured more rapidly by the end of the century than in the 1860s, with days lost to the hospital for fevers reducing by 47.13%, ophthalmia by 61.74% and venereal disease by 65.65%. Notwithstanding, patients were out of action for 17.44% longer when it came to physical injuries. However, a more accurate means of judging the effect of these diseases on the army is by looking at the average number of days of treatment per case admitted as detailed in Figure 3.2. This gives a much clearer indication of the initial difficulties faced by regimental doctors when tackling ophthalmia as well as the perennial problem of venereal disease.

Simply by analysing the Ministry of the Interior's volumes on national statistics published roughly every decade, it is clear to see that the authorities were both fascinated and afraid of blindness and deafness in equal measure, meticulously noting down figures relating to them. It is no wonder then that eye infections, specifically ophthalmia, were at the centre of much discussion and scientific attention in the army. This was a particularly pressing issue given that this disease - contracted from humid conditions or exposure to sudden temperature changes - caused men to be out of action for the highest average number of days of any ailment present in the army. In severe

²⁹⁹ See L. De Vos, 'Het Dagelijkse Leven van de Belgische Soldaat 1830 – 1848', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 24, no. 5, (1982), pp. 465-494; and vol. 24, no. 6, (1982), pp. 529-560.

cases, it even led to the loss of sight in one or both eyes, forcing some to leave the service altogether. The contagious nature of the infection, spread through the sharing of linens and handtowels, often ravaged entire garrisons claiming hundreds of men at a time. A report from the CO of the 2nd *Chasseurs à Cheval* to the Minister of War in November 1855 noted how the garrison at Mons had witnessed an outbreak of 15 cases, which three days later had infected 46 men in total.³⁰⁰ Even more striking were the reports coming from the Lieutenant Colonel of the 1st Lancers in 1857 whose report described that, within days of the outbreak, 135 men had contracted the disease, leaving 91 completely out of action.³⁰¹ Wastage rates of this magnitude were unacceptable and spurred the military authorities into seeking external help to rid the army of the disease.

Dr Leroy-Delchef was one such physician whom the army entrusted with finding a cure as early as 1833 after he had written to the Minister of War claiming to have used an ointment on civilian sufferers to great effect. He was granted permission to test his treatment on four soldiers with the disease in the Liège hospital, though the experiment was halted after 19 days of observation due to the severe worsening of the patients' conditions.³⁰² Part of the problem lay in the fact that there was an educational void resulting from very few studies on the workings of the eye, save for a solitary volume by the German physician Dr Weller. Even this was incomplete and pending a second volume, which many urged the Minister of War to purchase 200 copies of if ever it was published.³⁰³

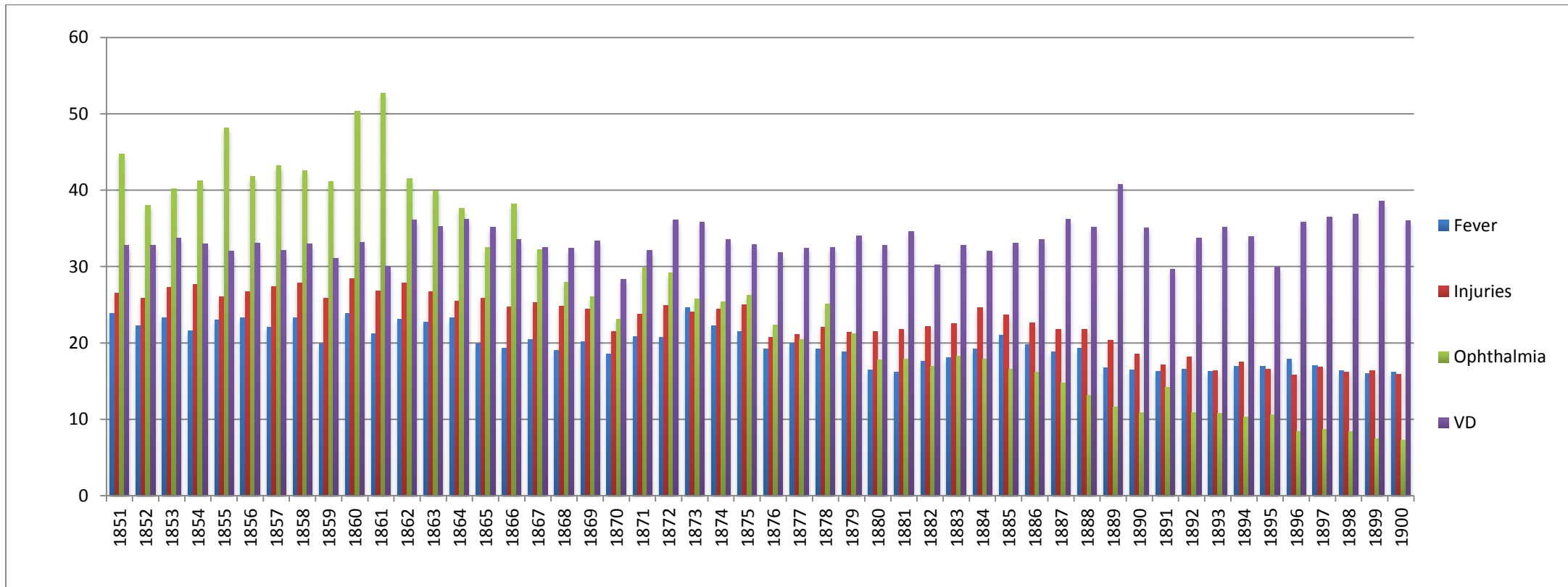
³⁰⁰ MRA, Medical Service, 10/6-1831, CO of 2 *Chasseurs à Cheval* to Minister of War, 14 November 1855.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 10/6-1841-1972, Daily Reports from Lieut-Col. of 1st Lancers quantifying the ophthalmia rate in the regiment. 26 April 1857 – 13 September 1857.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 10/6-2094, Report by Inspector General of the Health Service to Minister of War concerning a possible cure to ophthalmia offered by Dr Leroy-Delchef. 14 March 1833.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 10/6-2114, Report by Vleminckx to Evain, 20 February 1838.

Figure 3.2. Annual average number of days of treatment per admission by disease, 1851-1900.³⁰⁴



³⁰⁴ Figures computed from data in Exposé 1860, Tome II, pp. 474-475; 1875, Tome I, pp. 446-447; and 1900, Tome I, pp. 448-449.

Observation, however, soon drew attention to the fact that the disease was more common in crowded areas with poor ventilation and as a result of men being exposed to extreme cold straight from a place of warmth, such as going on guard duty. The British Army had established these same causes of poor hygiene and worked hard towards remedying their own situation through constructing new facilities. However, declining interest and finances meant that 30% of barracks and 10% of hospitals were left without adequate ventilation, much like in Belgium.³⁰⁵ Another physician, Dr Jungken, prescribed isolation as the best cure for ophthalmia, sending men home upon the first signs of contraction to nip the disease in the bud to prevent it from spreading amongst the rest of the garrison.³⁰⁶ It had the added benefit of supporting the 1823 Law on ophthalmia still in use at the time, which allowed for men to receive full pay for up to three months pending the processing of their pension application in severe cases.³⁰⁷ This method, though, had its detractors. A regimental doctor, F. Harion, wrote an article in the army's medical journal in 1848 discrediting Jungken's approach, which only encouraged the spread of the disease into the rest of the population. His own theory also centred around isolation but within the confines of the barracks, which, after having conducted two years of experiments, he found to be a much more hygienic environment when applied with a chlorine disinfectant. This achieved good results, though it was hampered by the poor circulation of air in most barracks, which was something that could not be remedied unless modern buildings were erected.³⁰⁸ It was partly as a result

³⁰⁵ Spiers, *Army and Society*, pp. 160-161.

³⁰⁶ MRA, Medical Service, 10/6-2096, Memo on ophthalmia in the army by Dr Jungken, 25 April 1834.

³⁰⁷ *Recueil Administratif* Tome II (July, 1832). No. 11. Circular regarding the pay of soldiers affected by ophthalmia and sent back to their homes. 1 September 1823.

³⁰⁸ *Archives de Médecine Militaire* Tome II (1848), Nouvelles Considerations Pratiques sur l'Ophthalmie de l'Armée par F. Harion, médecin de bataillon de 1ere classe, à Louvain.

of this that the serious nature of ophthalmia was not brought to manageable levels until well into the 1870s after which time the Government slowly rolled out its barrack regeneration programme.

Apart from ophthalmia, the biggest medical problem facing the army, in terms of the average number of days it kept men out of action for was the long established one of venereal disease. This, according to the data in Figure. 3.2, showed no signs of improving over the four decades examined, suggesting few successful initiatives to this end. It simply substantiated parents' fears as to the corruptive effect of the barracks, which, according to *Den Denderbode*, they were entitled to have given the reputation that had been accrued over successive generations.³⁰⁹ Indeed, the Catholic Representative, Henri Colfs pointed out the shocking practice that saw premiums paid to NCOs and retired soldiers by brothels to attract new recruits to these establishments for the purposes of renewing their customer base.³¹⁰ With occurrences such as these going unchecked into the twentieth century, it is clear why barrack life was despised by many and venereal disease remained such a persistent problem for the army. Interestingly, however, the Belgian Army did not appear to consider itself the worst offender in this respect, instead handing that unenviable tag to the British. A report compiled on the British Army suggested that in 1897, 19.46% of hospital admissions were syphilitic cases, compared to 10.04% in Italy, 6.54% in Austria, 4.09% in France and 2.67% in Germany.³¹¹ Based on that year's statistics furnished by the Ministry of the Interior, the Belgian Army could boast a relatively low level of venereal disease comparable with that of Austria-Hungary at 6.58%. Notwithstanding, it was still more than double that of Germany, the leading continental force at the time, and remained a

³⁰⁹ *Den Denderbode*, 1 May 1910.

³¹⁰ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 7 November 1901.

³¹¹ MRA: Fonds Moscou, Box 852: Notes on the British Army, 1908.

cause for concern amongst politicians and the public alike, particularly those of Catholic faith. For them, the army was not doing enough to fully trust them with the moral education of the nation's youth. This was just one of the reasons why the Catholics shied away from the growing pressure to introduce obligatory service, as it was felt that the army was too corruptive an institution.

Nevertheless, the presence of army chaplains allowed the Catholics to rest easier in the knowledge that agents of the faith were on hand to spiritually guide these soldiers through their time with the colours. J.R. Leconte's work probably remains the solitary publication of note on the subject and accurately details the chronological development of military chaplaincy of all faiths in the army, though with a particular emphasis on their wartime role.³¹² In fact, only one chapter is devoted to the nineteenth century, during which time, as shall be seen, the influence of religion in the army was of paramount political importance and was a real demonstration of how the State could influence and detrimentally interfere in military matters. Initially, in 1834, the army employed two Catholic military chaplains, appointed by the Minister of War, to serve at particular garrisons upon an official request. These two men were stationed in Brussels, with other military outposts reliant on local parish priests to fulfil the role. The difference between the two, was that the former provided a measure of consistency and stability, whilst local ministers were forced by their position to devote more time to the civilian community as well as being subject to more changes. It was argued that this engendered a certain loss of interest, knowledge and zeal from the men, who were often not encouraged by their officers to go and actively pursue their faith.³¹³ Count

³¹² J.R. Leconte, *L'Aumônerie militaire belge: Son évolution de l'époque hollandaise à l'organisation actuelle* (Musée Royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire Militaire, Brussels, 1967).

³¹³ Unionisme.be. Chamber of Representatives Debates, 18 April 1845.

Phillipe de Mérode was terribly concerned about this, stating shortly afterwards that parents had every right to be worried about the state of affairs as there were inherent dangers in removing a young man's traditional strut of moral support. Equally, the Government ought to have been concerned. It was their obligation 'in conscience and honour' to provide such spiritual guidance or risk losing the electoral support to raise annual contingents from voters who were not receiving the reassurances they desired for their sons.³¹⁴ This was among the reasons behind the increase in the number of military chaplains to forty-one by the 1880s.

With the rise of Liberal political influence, however, the expanding group of military chaplains saw their role change significantly from the early years following independence. Wary of directly interfering in spiritual matters, the Liberals were the force behind a policy that removed all rights and power from the chaplains, who held no rank, were not allowed to enter the barracks, hold meetings, deliver mass, hear confessions, or in any way encourage men to visit them during their free time. They were merely permitted to be present in military hospitals and perform their caring services there, administering the last rights and occasionally holding services if there was a chapel. Even this role was laughed off by the atheists in the ranks who, according to the *Journal de Gand*, would rather pass away peacefully than be 'annoyed' by the petty drivel of the chaplains.³¹⁵ Feelings such as this encouraged the Liberals to keep religion out of the army, or, at least, not impose it on those who did not wish to practice it.

On 9 April 1881 a more aggressive State intervention in the religious question in the army took root in the form of relieving six chaplains of their duties and restricting

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ *Journal de Gand*, 7 February 1888.

the capacities of the remainder to a bare minimum. On the pretext of reducing the Ministry of War's budget, chaplains' salaries were transferred to the Ministry of Justice which granted payments solely to those attached to a garrison with a military hospital. The overall cost of their upkeep was reduced by a mere 16,000 francs, but this was beside the point.³¹⁶ It resulted in fewer chaplains being allowed to tend to the spiritual needs of the same number of soldiers on a more infrequent basis, directly reducing religious influence in the army. This clearly concerned Catholic parents of prospective recruits who wanted certain assurances that spiritual provisions were in place for their sons once they left their traditional sphere of influence. Father Dethy replied to one such enquiry:

Soldiers are free to go to Church on Sundays, I am their priest like the other inhabitants of Mariembourg, but not being a chaplain, the authorisation to enter into the barracks is never granted, and never is such an invitation extended to me. There does exist a ministerial decree that provides for the case where I could be called to give extraordinary services to these young men, but neither confessions, nor the administration of the sacrament in the barracks, nor even the healing of the sick are considered as extraordinary circumstances.³¹⁷

Without authorisation, it was down to the individual to be self-disciplined and come to him in the town during their free time. It was a clear attempt to supplant local ties to region, community or home with a more institutionalised and acceptable concept of the wider nation. As much as it was State-driven by the Liberal Party, it was equally supported from within the army as well. Large sections of the predominantly Liberal officer corps were known to have systematically prevented men from observing their

³¹⁶ Leconte, *L'Aumônerie*, p. 17.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Correspondence from Father Dethy to a Representative in the Chamber, 17 February 1886.

religious duties by organising exercises and chores that confined them to the barracks whilst services or ceremonies were being held. This went contrary to the Ministerial Circular of 3 December 1835, which sought to protect the right to practise faith whilst under arms, and actually prompted the Minister of War to remind COs across the country to respect this fact in 1857.³¹⁸ Constrained on two fronts, Catholic soldiers found it increasingly difficult to regularly access the spiritual guidance to which they had grown accustomed in their local communities. This both alienated them from the values and customs of their homes whilst simultaneously steering them into the clutches of the perceived evils of the barracks and its corruptive elements.

Following the Catholics' regaining of power in 1884, an election heavily influenced by Socialist gains in the Liberal heartlands, the situation regarding military chaplains changed once again in their favour. They were keen to repair the damage of the Liberal policy, which in their mind was anti-national and undermined the 'foundations of one of the firmest supports of our nationality.'³¹⁹ The Law of 25 June 1889 was the defining moment of change, with the monetary charge reverting back to the Ministry of War. The Minister of War, General Charles Pontus, had already introduced some measures three weeks earlier. These included giving chaplains the honours granted to officers, allowing them to converse with soldiers within the garrisons, as well as with their parents. They were equally allowed to institute military masses, and recreate circles or groups of men for instruction, though only if they were present to oversee to prevent the infiltration of anti-militarist propaganda. These

³¹⁸ *Journal Officielle Militaire* hereafter *J.M.O.* 25 March 1857, Circular inviting commanding officers to scrupulously conform to the prescribed dispositions relating to the facilities to be accorded to soldiers to fulfil their religious duties.

³¹⁹ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 23 February 1881. This Liberal policy also extended to civilian life where they attempted to reduce the size of the clergy by up to 30%.

gatherings had previously been reproached for indoctrinating men with religious and political content but were officially reintroduced by Royal Decree on 13 September 1889 to the vexation of the Liberal Party.³²⁰ It led to heavy criticism being levelled at the Government over their apparent clericalisation of the army. This demonstrates the level of fear within Liberal circles of the dangers of allowing politics and religion to have a place in the national institution that was the army. The State, it was felt, ought not to interfere in these matters. However, this simply tended to be the rhetoric of opposition. Whenever Liberal policies were introduced during their periods of government, the roles would be inversed, with their attempting to convince the Catholics that the army and the State were remaining distinctly separate.

Nevertheless, moral guidance was still seen as an important issue to many, both in the population at large as well as in the army. Whereas much of the former and their political representatives, in the shape of the Catholic Party, wished to see it through the presence of the Church, the military authorities were more in favour of its promulgation through education. Regimental schools, established in June 1870, sought to achieve a number of simultaneous results, namely: the improvement of literacy among its ranks; the technical development of men for the good of society; and lastly to develop the best candidates for the role of NCOs. Attendance was made compulsory for the illiterates in each regiment to improve their basic levels of education and prepare them for what was becoming an increasingly technical profession. More broadly, the ‘school of the nation’ began offering a variety of different courses in an attempt to be a positive influence in the formation of good citizens who would be a benefit to society once released from military duty. They included things such as forestry and agronomy to keep men in tune with the professions that they had left behind, as well as expanding upon their

³²⁰ Ibid., 25 February 1881.

knowledge, which it was hoped they would take back with them to their local communes. It was through systems such as these, as well as a respect for military discipline, that officers believed the army was doing society a favour, often removing its undesirable elements and transforming them into clean, literate, moralised and professionally capable men. The results were questionable, but one Justice of the Peace noted:

Military service exerts a favourable influence on the youth; an individual leaves his village largely unrefined, but sometimes returns quite well instructed and always with a developed intelligence. [...] There are also, without doubt, and sadly, others who return with vicious habits, but they are the exception: the vast majority are bettered physically and morally.³²¹

Despite this relatively positive endorsement of military education, there were many who felt that the army was still more corruptive than anything else. Attendance at many of these classes was regularly poor, with men often finding their spare time better spent indulging in the excesses of taverns and brothels.

Georges Lorand was particularly of this opinion. In his propaganda pamphlet advocating the nation in arms, he spoke for a large portion of the public against the vices and idleness learned in the barracks, which in his view made ‘slaves of them [the men] and not citizens [...] often ruining their entire civilian future for this mirage of *esprit militaire*, which does neither good for the army nor them.’³²² Indeed, it was well publicised that men, particularly those new to urban life, could often be turned from innocent boys into corrupted men during their time with the colours despite the army’s best efforts. A combination of the vagabonds and low-life that they encountered, as

³²¹ Rec Comm 1852, pp. 27-28.

³²² Lorand, *Nation Armée*, p. 2.

well as the conditions of the barracks themselves, was enough to skew many a moral compass. The *Journal d'Ypres* corroborated this view in an article, which stated that the much frequented 'cabarets' and 'dens of the lowest sort' not only deprived recruits of their time and money but their morality as well.³²³ To some extent, this disproved the military authorities' theory that the better class of recruit would raise the moral and intellectual level of those from a lower social standing; if anything it had a reverse effect.

The belief that military efficiency was being undermined by the low class of man being furnished for its ranks through the ballot system brought the question of national education into increasingly sharp focus. It was felt that the intellectual and moral standard of recruit was well below the required mark. An inverse relationship between moral education and discipline was believed to have existed, which encompassed, among other things, an appreciation of national ideals. The 'school of the nation' could only do so much with what it was given and many felt that it was spending too much time undoing the damage of anti-militarism by inculcating the patriotic principles that ought to have been extolled from birth, rather than focussing on essential military training. This was all the more pertinent around the turn of the century when the time spent under arms was reduced to a mere fifteen months. It was noted in 1896 that 'The moral education of our citizens, must therefore, by all necessity, start in our schools and be closely supervised by the public authorities, because this national education at a young age is the most powerful lever to elevate and exalt the bravery and patriotism of the soldier.'³²⁴ However, this call for a standardised approach to schooling was unrealistic to say the least. Among the top issues on the national

³²³ *Journal d'Ypres*, 27 April 1872.

³²⁴ Lord Wah, *De l'Éducation Morale du Soldat et de son Influence sur la Discipline* (Ch. Lemaire, Liège, 1896), p. 11.

political agenda behind electoral reform in the final quarter of the nineteenth century was what became known as the ‘school wars’, a battle over educational practices that divided the Liberals and Catholics more than any other matter. This was at the heart of the problem and directly concerned the army due to the latter’s unwillingness to sanction a national compulsory education scheme for fear of undermining the Church’s position in independent institutions that had traditionally formed the scholarly edifice of the Flemish provinces.

For the Socialist leader, Emile Vandevælde, who joined forces with the Liberals to fight this particular battle, the Constitution’s ‘liberty of education’ was more of a social right to be exercised by the State, much like justice, as a counter-weight to arbitrary governance, not, as the Catholics saw it, as a free-market approach through which private education could flourish. However, as early as 1842, clerical schooling began to dominate through this more literal interpretation of the law. The Church itself wanted a monopoly and fought hard to keep the State from interfering in education.³²⁵ This gave them the latitude to construct the curriculum around religious morality at the expense of a more rounded education that included languages, arts and sciences. The results, from an intellectual point of view, were far from satisfactory. In 1882 men from that year’s levy, both literate and not, were asked a series of simple questions to test their degree of education. When asked where London could be found, 89% did not know that it was the capital of England. When asked who lost the Battle of Waterloo, 16% did not know. When asked about the electoral system, 76% were unaware what system Belgium operated under. Curiously, as well, there were five different answers given to the question; did Moses live before or after Jesus Christ?³²⁶ For its opponents,

³²⁵ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 22 January 1904.

³²⁶ Ibid., 16 May 1899.

this was vindication that clerical schooling had failed and the time was right to push once more for compulsory education. It had, unfortunately also led to the unenviable situation whereby foreign commentators saw Belgium's primary education as one of the worst in Europe.

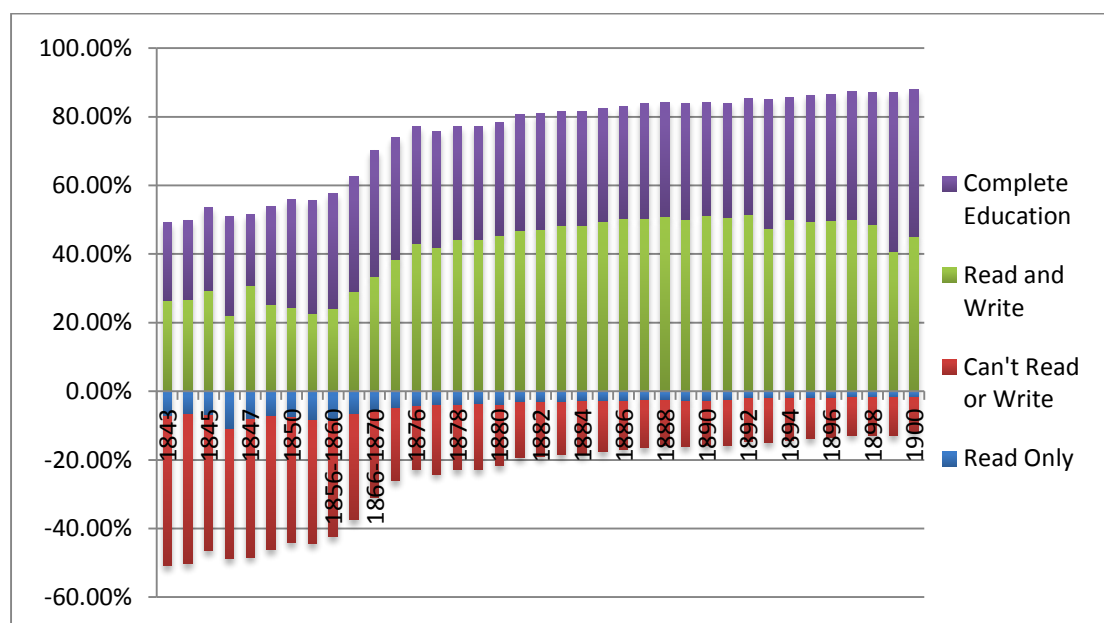
Similar opinions were articulated in the public sphere, this time in the press. The editor of *La Lutte – De Strijd*, for example, expressed genuine concern regarding the literacy rates in Belgium compared to other 'civilised' countries. He was of the opinion that the Catholics had systematically undermined scholarly practice despite it being clear that morality, as preached in the clerical system, was evidently not producing sufficiently educated men for a modern army. The newspaper claimed that in 1881 Belgium had 207 illiterates per 1,000 soldiers under arms. This compared poorly to other countries of a similar size, which boasted a mere 23 in Switzerland, 4 in Sweden, and 3 in Denmark. A decade later, Belgium had 159, to France's 74 and Germany's 2.4.³²⁷ A further fourteen years after that, *Le Progres* printed a similar article entitled 'The illiterates in the German and Belgian Armies', which took note of the disparity in the figures as well. It placed Belgium a long way behind Germany, Britain and France whose respective proportions of illiterates per 10,000 men were just two, 109, and 350, whilst Belgium stood at a less than impressive 1,137. This was still better than the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which reportedly had 2,800, Italy some 3,100 and Russia an astonishing 6,208.³²⁸ These figures tally up quite well with those published by the Ministry of the Interior, which demonstrated a steady progression in literacy rates among the annual contingents raised (See Fig. 3.3.). What is striking about these articles is the direct comparisons made to other European countries, both

³²⁷ *La Lutte - De Strijd*, 23 April 1898.

³²⁸ *Le Progres*, 14 January 1912.

neighbouring and of a similar size. Education had become all the more important following 1870 and Belgium was keen to follow Prussia's example in as many aspects

Figure. 3.3. Literacy rates amongst men incorporated into the annual contingent, 1843-1900.³²⁹



of military organisation as possible. The former Liberal Premier, Jean-Baptiste Nothomb, was quoted as saying in 1873 that ‘the best educated armies will be the best.’³³⁰ This shows the acceptance within Belgium that times had changed, that armies, to be successful, had to be educated despite the fear that with it also came the knowledge with which to call for – and exercise – the right to vote. Indeed, even Russia, firmly set in its monarchical despotism, introduced reforms with the primary aim of educating its illiterate peasant masses in 1874.³³¹

³²⁹ Compiled from data in Exposé 1852, Exposé 1860, Tome II, p. 414; Exposé 1875, Tome II, p. 9; and Exposé 1900, Tome II, p.258.

³³⁰ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 15 May 1873.

³³¹ Strachan, *European Armies*, p. 110.

The main problem emanating from the education question in a military sense was its effect on discipline. Not only were poorly educated men more susceptible to finding the rigours of military life difficult to cope with but the ever-present and inextricable issue of language added a further layer of complication. During a 1913 debate in the Chamber of Representatives, Henrik Borginon claimed that Flemish-speaking soldiers were being disciplined more severely than their French-speaking counterparts as a result of the language barrier between themselves and their officers. Not only were orders difficult to follow but difficulties for soldiers to form a coherent verbal defence of their actions also proved problematic. Between 1907 and 1909 some 261 men categorised as *disciplinaires* were shown to be 20.3% Walloon (53) and 79.7% Flemish (208), whilst the 952 categorised as *correctionnaires* were split 26% and 74% respectively. Additionally, Borginon quoted figures that suggested of the 3,595 deserters during this period, 1,068 (29.7%) were native French-speakers and 2,527 (70.3%) were Flemish.³³² When looking at these figures, he questioned why, when these country folk – as most of them were of rural stock – ‘have been raised with the idea that, obeying one’s parents, is obeying God; obeying the authorities is obeying one’s parents, that all serious disobedience, if it is not punished by man, will certainly be punished by God, who knows all, who sees all, and who can do all’, do they find themselves punished more frequently?³³³ The answer, it appeared, had to be in a degree of linguistic discrimination. This often saw young Flemish soldiers misunderstood at the first instance and punished unjustly accordingly, creating a demoralising effect that began a cycle of repeat offences in an attempt to strike back at the establishment.

³³² Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 23 April 1913.

³³³ Ibid.

Indeed, a senior officer told Borginon just that, claiming that three-quarters of men faced with a primary case of injustice fell into this trap.

During the presentation of his argument, Liberal members of the Chamber heckled Borginon, claiming that it was his own party, the Catholics, who had brought this situation on the Flemish people through their persistence in maintaining clerical education. Adolphe Buyl shouted: ‘In Flanders, many clerical schools; many illiterates. In Wallonia, few clerical schools; few illiterates. There is your proof!’³³⁴ The education debate was the easiest way for the largely French-speaking Liberals to discard the figures being thrown their way, as for them the blame lay in the Catholics’ defiance towards encouraging intellectual education in Flanders. Indeed, regimental school examination results for the Engineers appeared to be a case in point, with 100% pass rate for Walloons but only 41% for Flemish candidates. Nevertheless, this was in fact a reflection of the long-standing education laws that forced Flemish children to study the sciences in French, rather than evidence to hold up against clerical schooling. Only 17% of Flemish students received a nomination for excellent results in the sciences compared to 55% of Walloons. However, the proportions were ever so slightly reversed in the arts, taught in each region’s mother tongue, with 29% of Flemish students obtaining nominations, whilst Wallonia only produced 27%.³³⁵ Borginon finished his argument by claiming that the army was a school in itself and its pupils deserved equal treatment and opportunity in it, something that the current state of affairs was severely restricting. Despite demonstrating that clerical schooling was not necessarily at fault for the perceived lack of instruction amongst Flemish soldiers, it is clear to see that education and discipline were thought of as being wedded together to a great extent.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid.

There is certainly an element of truth in the matter, with the proportion of illiterate offenders out-weighting their proportion of the population throughout the century. Whilst this was not a direct result of clerical schooling *per-se*, the obstacles placed in the way of compulsory education by the Catholics, which had already taken root in much of Europe, was partly to blame.

Linguistic discrimination with regard to discipline was certainly not a new phenomenon. It plagued the courts-martial process for a number of years to the severe chagrin of the Flemish-speaking community. A law governing the use of languages in military courts was not passed until 1873 but most lawyers and juries – ostensibly Walloon by birth – generally ignored this until another one was passed in 1901, which unequivocally placed Flemish and French on an equal footing. By this time, however, an unquantifiable, though undoubtedly large, number of disciplinary cases had seen Flemish soldiers unjustly tried for crimes which they either had not committed or were incapable of formulating a satisfactory defence for in French. An interesting case that shook the very foundations of the court-martial process occurred in Bruges in 1887. A lawyer named Devisschere, believing it to be his professional duty to give his clients the fairest trial possible, took up the defence of one Walloon and four Flemish soldiers and proceeded to make the case for the latter in their native language. This caused ‘a great commotion’ among the officers presiding over the court who exclaimed that they either only knew literary Flemish (*Flamand Académique*), which differed significantly from the regional dialects of common soldiers, had limited knowledge of the language or absolutely none at all. The lawyer, sticking to a very strict application of the 1873 Law, continued on, forcing the panel of officers to enlist the aid of an interpreter to carry on with proceedings. The cases of all four Flemish soldiers were heard in this fashion but when it came to the remaining Walloon soldier, Devisschere, reverted to

the use of French in order that his client would understand. This was, according to the newspaper that reported it, the first ever instance of such a stand for Flemish rights in a military court in the province, and possibly even the country – though rumours of a similar case in Antwerp were being circulated.³³⁶ It helped spark a lively campaign in the local press whose editors flocked to the colours of Flemish linguistic rights. *Het Lan van Aelst*, for example, wrote in 1892 that; ‘Flemish soldiers in French courts-martial, is something both stupid and barbarous [...] however it will not be long; the Flemish Lion roars about it, there are petitions made, that must be made, so that in short, the Flemish language MUST be given its full rights.’³³⁷ The court-martial system was deemed so archaic that it would even have been mocked in the Middle Ages, particularly instances in which arbitrary judgement were being passed on Flemish soldiers whose trials were a decade in arrears of their Walloon counterparts on account of the linguistic barrier.³³⁸ Opinions such as these both summed up the problem at hand whilst simultaneously uncovering another. Illustrations of linguistic discrimination were not only poor for the army’s image and morale, but more fundamentally undermined its very fabric as the ‘school of the nation’ whose role was to be a unifying force, not a divisive one as it had become.

Although language was a contentious issue in the debate surrounding military discipline, it was in fact the humanitarian aspect that really gave it some impetus in the political milieu. It was bad enough that in some cases Flemish soldiers were treated unjustly let alone that the army as a whole was doling out seemingly arbitrary and often degrading punishments. The feeling that disciplinary measures were too harsh in the army took root amongst the social reactionaries who were disgusted by the inequalities

³³⁶ *Den Denderbode*, 22 December 1887.

³³⁷ *Het Lan van Aelst*, 3 January 1892.

³³⁸ *Den Denderbode*, 6 September 1891.

witnessed when comparing civilian and military sentences for comparable crimes. Often, minor infringements in the army could land a soldier in the *cachots*, similar to the ‘black holes’ used in the British Army at this time.³³⁹ These small, dark individual cells, were described as ‘veritable hovels where the laws of hygiene and morality are not observed’ and were often considerably more unpalatable than what many civilian murderers could expect in the relative comforts of the philanthropically supported state of the art prisons.³⁴⁰ This was particularly galling when it was revealed that the majority of offenders were young men, aged 21 to 25 with under three years’ experience.³⁴¹ What this shows is that men committed the majority of crimes during their adjustment period between civilian and military life. This transition was often difficult to cope with, especially for the uneducated who could not draw on their experience of regimented discipline in the classroom to transfer to the army. With the national average at this time indicating that 42% of the male population did not possess an elementary ability to write, the fact that 48% of offenders were unable to sign their own name, somewhat corroborates this theory.³⁴² Equally, young men from rural backgrounds could easily have their heads turned by the manipulative elements in the barracks who opened their eyes to the vibrancy of city life. Understanding was called for by some elements of society who felt that the army was not being responsive enough to the extenuating circumstances involved in many of these petty crimes. Georges Lorand, advocated a change in the army’s position, stating:

What is needed today, is that the spirit of the army merges increasingly
with the spirit of the nation; since the entire nation must necessarily be called

³³⁹ P. Burroughs, ‘Crime and Punishment in the British Army, 1815-1870’, *The English Historical Review*, vol. 100, no. 396, (July, 1985), p. 557.

³⁴⁰ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 7 March 1866.

³⁴¹ Exposé 1860, Titre II, p. 481.

³⁴² Ibid.

to be part of the army, it is necessary that the army penetrates the rules of civilian life and that any exceptions are kept to a strict minimum for the maintenance of discipline, and discipline will maintain itself all the more readily if the rules imposed on the army conform better with rules of morality and honour adopted by the rest of the nation.³⁴³

It was a plea that echoed the sentiments of the population with regard to barrack conditions, which, in no uncertain terms, demanded that the authorities undertake a degree of responsibility towards the well-being of the nation's youth that was being entrusted to it. Unfortunately for those on the receiving end, it was a duty that they were slow to act upon.

Reports of arbitrary punishments of a degrading nature caused uproar in the press. One such example occurred in Mons at a shooting exercise in 1846 when the Sergeant-Instructor violently struck a soldier of the 8th Line Regiment in the stomach for some misdemeanour that forced him to leave the exercise field with blood coming from his mouth and nose, the visible effects of internal wounds that saw the man die three days later. This 'act of revolting brutality' as *Le Propagateur* reported, 'provoked indignation among all those who witnessed it', leaving the editor in no doubt that such forms of punishment should be forbidden as it was degrading to the soldier to the point of removing all personal dignity.³⁴⁴ Another instance saw men arbitrarily punished with 'forced labour of the worst kind' by their NCO who appeared to take great pleasure in making the accused march, fully equipped, from dawn until dusk for fifty consecutive days in the heat of summer, with only the discomfort of the *cachots* awaiting them each

³⁴³ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 8 December 1898.

³⁴⁴ *Le Propagateur*, 16 September 1846.

night.³⁴⁵ Acts such as these, it was argued, made men commit more crimes in an attempt either to strike back at the establishment or simply to escape. This appeared neither to resemble military discipline nor moral re-education.

There were some striking similarities between reactions to degrading punishments in Belgium in the mid-nineteenth century to those surrounding the campaign to abolish corporal punishment in Britain. The anti-flogging campaign, which rose to prominence following the Napoleonic Wars, though whose origins date back to the late eighteenth century, aroused unprecedented consternation from a number of different pressure groups.³⁴⁶ Brutal and degrading as it might have been, the lash had been the mainstay of British military discipline for centuries and represented the institutional conservatism of the army in their somewhat dated view by the 1820s that punishment directed at the body was more effective than the ‘march of the mind’, which had begun to make headway in the civilian penal system.³⁴⁷ A similar disparity manifested itself in Belgium, as has already been alluded to, in which an increasingly prominent philanthropic and moral undertone governed the execution of civil law, whilst the army continued to promote the standardised use of *cachots*; *reclusion*, another form of incarceration; and the *brouette*, which involved excessive hard labour for a determined period of time, often years, whilst being physically chained to a wheelbarrow. Although not as outwardly degrading as flogging, these punishments still

³⁴⁵ *Le Sentinelle belge: Revue d'actualité militaires et politiques et recueil de science d'art et d'histoire comemporaine*, no. 14, (1865), pp. 3-4.

³⁴⁶ For more on the anti-flogging campaign in Britain, see J.R. Dinwiddy, ‘The Early Nineteenth-Century Campaign against Flogging in the Army’, *The English Historical Review*, vol. 97, no. 383, (April, 1982), pp. 308-331; E.E. Steiner, ‘Separating the Soldier from the Citizen: Ideology and Criticism of Corporal Punishment in the British Armies, 1790-1815’, *Social History*, vol. 8, no. 1, (January, 1983), pp. 19-35; and Burroughs, ‘Crime and Punishment’ pp. 545-571.

³⁴⁷ Dinwiddy, ‘Campaign against Flogging’, p. 318; and Burroughs, ‘Crime and Punishment’, p. 561.

divided opinion over their use and effectiveness, leading to the eventual suspension of the *cachot* in 1883 in favour of a policy of persuasion.³⁴⁸ With the ‘school of the nation’ promoting moral values and education, it appeared contradictory to oversee such instruction by strict and humiliating means. Indeed, for those families who surrendered their sons to the army, the prospect of seeing them imprisoned, harmed, shamed and ultimately disaffected with authority undermined the entire principle upon which their unwritten social contract with the State was based.

An examination of the available data would suggest that, much like the British system, discipline in its frequency and severity varied between regiments depending on the attitude of the CO. At higher levels, conservative militarists, such as General Vander Linden, extolled the virtues of rigorous discipline, whilst others took an increasingly moderate approach that was more in tune with changing attitudes of society.³⁴⁹ They cited examples of various regiments with higher numbers of disciplinary charges against them as proof. Indeed, among the twelve Line Regiments between 1850 and 1859, the average number of offences for the period was just below 470 apiece, and whereas some units, such as the 4th Line Regiment, could boast an exemplary record of 330 offences, others, like the 7th and 8th Line Regiments, recorded much higher figures of 580 and 573 respectively.³⁵⁰ This demonstrates the extent to which circumstances and individual attitudes could play a role in determining the application of discipline, though the claim that arbitrary punishments were being passed by perverse COs was somewhat misleading. Firstly, the figures quoted by politicians to prove their point were, as General Chazal noted, often wrong and stemmed largely from a misunderstanding of military organisation. For example, the elite Grenadier Regiment

³⁴⁸ RA 2137, Circular by Gratry to all the Military Authorities, 30 April 1883.

³⁴⁹ Rec Comm 1852.

³⁵⁰ Exposé 1860, Tome II, pp. 482-483.

always appeared to have more disciplinary cases than other units but this was a direct result of it being composed of five active battalions instead of four, considerations often overlooked by politicians pushing an agenda of social reform.³⁵¹ Secondly, and perhaps more fundamentally, severe punishments such as the *brouette* could only be enforced through the official and regimented process of a court-martial. Additionally, it took a minimum of three minor infringements at regimental level for a man to be brought before a military tribunal in any case – except for serious breaches of discipline – all of which had to be reviewed by the assembled jury and subsequently by the Minister of War before a sentence could be passed.³⁵² This is not to say that COs could not make life uncomfortable for their men, or that discrimination of one sort or another did not occur, but the process was designed to guard against such abuses.

Most offences were dealt with at regimental level without recourse to courts-martial. The most common transgressions were desertion, the selling of effects, and theft, respectively accounting for 33.13%, 31.44%, and 22.42% of the 10,153 recorded cases between 1850 and 1859.³⁵³ Peter Burroughs suggested that desertion and absence without leave in the British army, which rose from a comparable 37% of all offences committed in the home force in the 1830s to a staggering 63% by the mid-1850s, was a mark of protest against conditions of army life.³⁵⁴ If this was indeed the case, then the Belgian figures for the same period would suggest that they were comparatively happier with their lot or lived in better conditions. However, this would be somewhat misleading. Certainly, Belgian desertion rates did not match those of the British but it still represented an annual loss of around 336 men in the 1850s and 310 men between

³⁵¹ Plenum.be. Chamber of Representative Debates, 7 March 1866.

³⁵² Ibid., 24 January 1894.

³⁵³ Exposé 1860, Tome II, pp. 482-483.

³⁵⁴ Burroughs, 'Crime and Punishment', p. 553.

1876 and 1900. In addition, the annual death toll amounted to 714 men: an astonishing figure for a neutral force.³⁵⁵ This proves that living conditions were anything but adequate, whilst also advancing an explanation as to why desertion rates were not comparable with Britain's; namely a number of men died before they had the chance. Equally, the average annual figure of 310 men lost to desertion between 1876 and 1900 is slightly lower than it should be. This is due to two amnesties granted in 1880 and 1890 for the fiftieth anniversary of independence and the twenty-fifth anniversary of Leopold II's accession to the throne. These years saw a net increase to the establishment of 735 and 1,852 respectively, which somewhat distorts the desertion average for this period. A similar period of grace was granted in 1866 as well, though this was seen as being destructive to military discipline as it, to all intents and purposes, incentivised desertion and the foregoing of a man's citizenly duties.³⁵⁶ This mirrored the situation in the French army, whose own amnesties failed to establish a humanitarian concept of discipline and all but dissolved some regiments into chaos.³⁵⁷

More serious offences, such as insubordination, murder and mutiny, were naturally taken to a district court-martial for trial.³⁵⁸ These tribunals had the power to impose heavy punishments on offenders including: lengthy periods in prison; the *brouette*; time with the *Corps de Correction*; and even public derision in the stocks. But none were more infamous than the death penalty, which although passed on multiple occasions was seldom enforced. With the nascent army in the field and under conditions of war, only one of the first ten death sentences passed was carried out

³⁵⁵ Exposé 1860, Tome II, pp. 482-483; and Exposé 1900, Tome I, p. 416.

³⁵⁶ Plenum.be. Chamber of Representatives Debates, 13 August 1880.

³⁵⁷ Porch, *March to the Marne*, p. 130.

³⁵⁸ For more on the process of Courts-Martial in Belgium and particularly the role of auditors, see E. Bastin, *La justice militaire en Belgique de 1830 à 1850: l'auditeur militaire 'valet' ou 'cheville ouvrière' des conseils de guerre?* (Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2012).

between 1832 and 1834, with the authorities believing that this would suffice as a deterrent.³⁵⁹ The available evidence suggests that only two more sentences were carried out in the army, in both cases to NCOs, in 1852 and 1856. These figures appear exceptionally low compared to Edward Spiers' for the British Army in the nineteenth century, which state that 41 out of 76 death sentences between 1826 and 1835, and 33 out of 44 between 1865 and 1898 were carried out.³⁶⁰ The disparity between the two was mostly a result of the British army's active service abroad, but also partly due to the different recruiting systems creating opposing prisms through which to view the individual. A voluntary army recruited from society's lowest classes afforded more liberty to exert powerful State control on all aspects of their existence, whereas the ballot system that begrudgingly drew in a wider cross-section of the population, in theory at least, limited the force that could be used against them. This was one of the few instances where the population could hold the State to a degree of accountability over conditions in the army.

Nevertheless, a host of different crimes could see a soldier sentenced with the death penalty. Examples in the press can be found for those sentenced to it for desertion and insubordination during times of war, others for causing harm to individuals and damage to civilian property.³⁶¹ The most common misdemeanour, however, was murder. Yet, despite the severity of the crime, the vast majority of cases were commuted to a lesser penalty. Mitigating circumstances often counted for a lot, as in the case of four men tried by district court-martial in East Flanders in 1865. Their premeditated murder of a civilian was deemed more understandable given the evidence

³⁵⁹ E-G. Bartels, *L'Abolition de la Peine de Mort* (Doux fils, Namur, 1871), p. 21.

³⁶⁰ Spiers, *Army and Society*, p. 62.

³⁶¹ *Le Propagateur*, 7 May 1831; 20 June 1835; 17 September 1836; and 15 February 1862.

presented that the deceased had previously subjected his attackers to extreme violence. The two main suspects had their sentences reduced to five years *detention*, whilst the other two had theirs reduced further to just three years.³⁶² More surprisingly, a *Chasseur-Carabinier* was acquitted for the murder of a foreign national, a Frenchman, during the 1848 *Risquons Tout* affair near the frontier. The reason behind the decision of the West Flanders district court-martial that presided over the case was that this victim had been heard insulting Belgium and had maltreated a number of local inhabitants, thus justifying the action taken against him. *Le Propagateur* added, ‘This acquittal has engendered a general satisfaction in our town, and we do not doubt that this news will be received with the same feeling of joy by the rest of the country as well.’³⁶³ More sinister cases in the early twentieth century, including the murder of a landlady with a pair of scateurs, as well as a nurse made to look like she had committed suicide, likewise saw the soldiers have their death sentences commuted.³⁶⁴

Exonerations such as these were equally a result of the changing attitude towards the death penalty in civil law in Belgium, which was itself following a wider European trend of using rehabilitative methods over capital punishment. Indeed, by the early 1860s, Belgian civil executions were coming to an end, with the last recorded case occurring in 1863. This was followed by a motion to remove it from the civil penal code in 1867 but it was rejected by 35 votes to 15. Although by no means the last country to tackle the issue, other European states of a similar stature had stolen a march on Belgium. Indeed, the last civic executions to take place in European countries apart from Germany, France and United Kingdom before the turbulence of the twentieth century were; Romania 1828; Portugal 1846; Moldova 1849; Holland 1860; Saxony

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 30 December 1865.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 28 May 1848.

³⁶⁴ *De Volksstem*, 31 August 1912; and *De Poperinghenaar*, 27 February 1910.

1868; the Swiss Cantons 1873; and Italy in 1874. On the other hand, Belgium appeared to be among the leaders in attempting to strike the death penalty from the law, despite failing to do so on a number of occasions from as early as 1832. Only a handful of German principalities managed to successfully abolish the death penalty as early as 1818, with the majority of European states lagging at least half a century behind. Romania and Portugal did so in 1866 and 1867 respectively, with Saxony following suit in 1868. In 1870 there was a movement to abolish it in the Northern Confederation but Bismarck intervened and it was maintained after a close vote. The campaign in The Netherlands was so successful in 1870 that upon a complete overhaul of their penal code in 1881, its reestablishment was not seriously considered. Italy, trailing a few years behind finally abolished capital punishment in 1889.³⁶⁵ It remained nominally on the statute books in Belgium until 1996, though no executions took place between 1863 and 1914 due to Leopold II's opposition to its application - except in Africa.³⁶⁶ In total, there were fifty-five executions carried out in Belgium prior to the First World War, with all those condemned to death during the period of grace of Leopold II's reign given an automatic commutation. As a result, other penalties such as incarceration or various forms of hard labour became increasingly common. If executions were not an option to keep a degenerating society in check, then hard-line discipline through unsavoury punishments was naturally the corollary.

It was that early nineteenth century awareness of moral degeneracy in society that largely vindicated these severe actions. The increasing intervention of the State in public affairs and the reconceptualization of crime and punishment naturally fed its way into European armies which tended to recruit from among the lower tiers of the

³⁶⁵ Plenum.be. Chamber of Representatives Debates, 3 May 1893.

³⁶⁶ J. Stengers, *L'Action du Roi en Belgique depuis 1831* (Racine, Brussels, 2008), p. 112.

population. Military traditionalists in Britain certainly believed that, ‘If there was not exactly a criminal class in the army, there was a ‘criminal’ element.’³⁶⁷ This was equally the case in Belgium, particularly with regard to replacements. However, in a strange turn of events, it was actually volunteers who, proportionate to their number, boasted the worst disciplinary record in the army. Discharge figures showed that fifty-six men out of every hundred were volunteers, whilst replacements and substitutes accounted for thirty-three, and conscripts a mere eleven. At first glance it would suggest that replacements did not live up to the poor reputation that they had acquired. However, as Lieutenant General Désart explained to the 1866 Commission, the number of volunteers discharged outweighed the other categories of men by a significant proportion as a result of State versus family interests. What he meant by this was that volunteers were expendable to the army if found to be inept or corrupt without facing any consequences, except perhaps the loss in manpower. Contrarily, if a replacement was discharged for similar offences, it would place a far greater burden on society by forcing the families, who had paid for these men, to find further replacements or be forced to send their sons for whom they had paid extortionate amounts of money to protect them from this fate already.³⁶⁸ As such, greater clemency was granted to the worst and most despised class of recruit, who despite their perversions found a second chance in the *Corps de Discipline* or *Corps de Correction* set up to moralise and correct men for both the good of the army as well as society.

The *Corps de Discipline* were established as early as 1831 and provided a means through which the army could rid its regiments of bad elements without incurring the equivalent loss in manpower. It was reserved for troublesome men, who had not

³⁶⁷ Burroughs, ‘Crime and Punishment’, p. 547.

³⁶⁸ Comm 1866, 10th Meeting, 30 March 1867.

committed crimes serious enough to merit a court-martial, but whose conduct was repeatedly poor and could not be curbed by standard regimental punishments. This was subject to abuse by a number of COs who would sometimes rather wash their hands of an individual prematurely than exhaust the full repertoire of disciplinary measures at their disposal.³⁶⁹ The regime of harsh discipline was created to knock men into shape with a view to returning them to their units to complete their engagement as quickly as possible. In some instances, however, these corps provided a useful resource of manpower whilst still ‘unreformed’. This was particularly the case when it came to raising and sending expeditionary forces abroad, such as to Portugal in 1832-1834, with one list of 974 names suggesting that 27.6% were taken from these companies.³⁷⁰

More serious military crimes saw men sent to the sister *Corps de Correction* following a court-martial, whose regime was similarly much tougher than that practised in the army proper. It operated under a three-tiered system of rights, akin to that used in British disciplinary facilities in the nineteenth century.³⁷¹ It was designed to foster good conduct and a desire to progress up the ladder of reform to enjoy the sparse privileges allotted whilst with the company. New entrants and those with poor disciplinary records formed the third, and lowest, group called the *Classe de Puniton* who were forbidden to receive visitors, correspondence, use the library, or attend any of the lessons provided. Following the same principles of the ‘school of the nation’

³⁶⁹ *J.M.O.* 2 February 1833, Circular to Commanding Officers relating to the clothing of men sent to the *Compagnie de Discipline*.

³⁷⁰ The remainder of the force was comprised of 18.8% voluntary enlistments from the army, 42.4% of non-nationals from foreign depots, 3.3% of convicts from the Aalst Prison, and 7.9% partisans. MRA, Belgian Military Abroad, Portugal II/69. List of names of military personnel who received leave to serve in Portugal. For further reading on Belgium’s involvement in Portugal see J. Lorette, ‘Les expéditions militaires belges au Portugal en 1832 et 1833’, *Carnet de la Fourragère*, vol. 8, no. 8, (December, 1948), pp. 427-473 and vol. 9, no. 2, (June, 1850), pp. 95-140.

³⁷¹ Burroughs, ‘Crime and Punishment’, pp. 565-566.

concept, these included scholarly instruction (taught in both French and Flemish), fencing, gymnastics and singing. Their existence merely consisted of drill, exercises and labour. The second group, named the *Classe d'Épreuve*, consisted of men who had spent at least three months with the *Classe de Puniton* but had shown themselves to be submissive to the strict discipline of the regime and were making progress in their moral re-education. They were permitted to attend the above-mentioned lessons, use the library, and receive a degree of correspondence and visitors as their reward. The first group, the *Classe de Récompense*, was reserved for men who had served over half their sentence and had shown exemplary conduct whilst with the *Corps de Correction*. This group was allowed to undertake work outside the confines of the establishment in which they were based and were the only ones who could be granted grace or a shortening of their sentence.³⁷² Despite outwardly projecting an image of reformatory capabilities, the extent to which either corps was successful was a cause of much debate. Indeed it was often claimed that men were either dismissed from the army altogether whilst with the *Corps de Discipline* and the *Corps de Correction*, or within weeks of re-joining their regiments.³⁷³

With inconclusive results, the obvious questions relating to the severity of the regime began to emerge more frequently and with increased urgency. In France, a 'humanitarian' concept of discipline took root in Government, and latterly military, circles in the early twentieth century that all but dissolved their military justice system, including their *Compagnies de Discipline*. With reformers keen to repair much of the damage caused by overly harsh discipline, men in these companies who showed even the slightest signs of 'rehabilitation' were immediately released back into their

³⁷² *J.M.O.* 31 December 1870, Royal Decree Concerning the Creation of a Special Corps of Discipline and Correction.

³⁷³ Comm. 1852, 28th Meeting, 14 January 1852.

regiments as of May 1902.³⁷⁴ Belgian activists, already forcefully campaigning for improvements in all facets of military life, took much the same approach as their neighbours with regard to the *Corps de Correction* that was permanently established at Vilvoorde. It was written as late as 1910, at which time the continued existence of the facility was brought into question, that '[t]he establishment at Vilvoorde is, in effect, a vestige of the past. The system employed there would not stand up to one minute of specialist examination.'³⁷⁵ Punishments inflicted there were double the length of those applied for the same crime at regimental level and were considered to be 'from another era.'³⁷⁶ Such infringements could no longer be tolerated by a population that was rapidly losing faith in the supposed constructive, moralising methods of the 'school of the nation'. Anti-militarism was on the rise and contradictions such as those witnessed in Vilvoorde were doing nothing to endear the army to its population.

In 1905 the Minister of War, Cousebandt d'Alkemade, had had to reassure members of the Chamber that punishments were 'inflicted in a way to avoid anything that could give them a humiliating character' and that it was never lost sight of that 'the institution of the *Corps de Correction* has as its goal to return these misguided men, more worthy, back into the army's ranks.'³⁷⁷ There were even claims that men were deliberately trying to cause crime in a bid to be dismissed from the army altogether and escape the abhorrent conditions. Yet there were those who took a decidedly different view of the institution claiming that it was not as bad as its reputation suggested. If anything, it was providing a service by ridding regiments of the 'abnormals' and 'degenerates' who ought not to have even been incorporated into the army in the first

³⁷⁴ Porch, *March to the Marne*, p. 129.

³⁷⁵ *Journal de Charleroi*, 28 September 1910.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 8 June 1911.

³⁷⁷ Plenum.be. Chamber of Representatives Debates, 31 January 1905.

place.³⁷⁸ Notwithstanding, public opinion was with the former view and pushed for its closure, especially following claims that there was no proper system in place to guard against abuses. Indeed, reports constantly circulated that despite annual inspections, during which inmates were allowed to speak freely about their experiences, it was a known fact that military culture did not allow this and any man brave enough to speak out against the establishment would be severely punished as soon as the officials had left.³⁷⁹ Eventually, however, the humanitarian movement succeeded and Vilvoorde was finally confined to history in 1913 but not without its own measure of controversy.

A new wave of criticism was directed at the Government for the timing of this decision, which happened to coincide with the introduction of general service later that year. A number of socialist writers penned cynical remarks on this subject, claiming that it was only as a result of the inevitably increased bourgeois presence in the ranks that such an abominable institution was being done away with so as to protect them from its horrors.³⁸⁰ One such example by a socialist officer, writing in the *Journal de Charleroi*, brought the class struggle to the fore. A number of laws had been passed in recent years in an apparent attempt to improve conditions for the incoming bourgeois recruits that would never have been contemplated prior to universal conscription. Reduced periods of service, a new system for university companies, regional recruitment, increased leave, a paternalistic movement among officers, and above all the reorganisation of the disciplinary and correctional companies with the closure of Vilvoorde, were but a few implementations to support this claim.³⁸¹ Nevertheless, there is no evidence to suggest that there was a co-ordinated governmental initiative to this

³⁷⁸ *Le Soir*, 6 April 1910.

³⁷⁹ Plenum.be. Chamber of Representatives Debates, 31 January 1905..

³⁸⁰ *Journal de Charleroi*, 28 September 1910.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5 June 1911.

end, though it certainly created a platform for critics to voice their opinions. Leaving the wider political agenda aside, what this pointed towards, in military terms, was simply another failure by the State to fulfil its role in sufficiently protecting the men entrusted to it.

Paternalism in command, and by extension in the application of discipline, was a concept that was establishing itself in many European armies as a result of changing social ideals as the nineteenth century drew to a close. With the army being the veritable ‘school of the nation’ it appeared essential that Belgian officers embrace this role. Yet, the prolongation of poor conditions and mistreatment of soldiers, particularly in institutions such as Vilvoorde beyond the turn of the century, overshadowed attempts by some conscientious officers to institute this new style of command. Even the celebrated Prussian General, Colmar von der Goltz, was quoted as saying, ‘today, more than ever before [officers must] be an elite, an aristocracy in the nation, not an aristocracy of birth anymore, but an intellectual and moral aristocracy’, in order to more readily extol the virtues of softer discipline that would call to the ‘hearts’ and ‘reason’ of soldiers entering the ranks.³⁸² Similarly, the Adjutant-Major of the 10th Line Infantry Regiment suggested that modern discipline had to consist of men wanting to do their officers’ will. To achieve this he believed that,

We must get to know the parents of our soldiers, show them that we love their sons, that their well-being is our greatest concern, and that we will push ourselves to keep them as good, and as attached to their paternal homes, as when they were conferred to us; and in return we will have the affection of the entire family and the devotion of our men.³⁸³

³⁸² Wah, *l'Éducation Morale*, pp. 13 & 17.

³⁸³ J. Wodon, *Essai sur l'éducation morale militaire considéré dans ses rapports avec la discipline* (G. Everling, Arlon, 1901), pp. 11-12.

This was the very essence of what was meant by the 'school of the nation' and followed the evolving values of Belgian society. If anything, these beliefs of how the youth of the nation ought to have been treated whilst under arms was much longer standing, and the fact that it took until the turn of the century for these ideas to permeate the army at large is indicative of its underlying failings. If armies were a reflection of the nation, then Belgium was far less progressive in its civil attitude than it cared to portray.

The nineteenth century was a transformative period of social ideals that created demands on the State at various levels of civilian and military life. Belgium was no exception and perhaps expected even more as a result of a long-established, ingrained anti-militarism that caused parents of successive generations to pressure the authorities to make time spent with the colours both physically bearable and morally sound for their sons. A belief that standing armies were a despotic tool did little to commend the idea of the barracks to the wider population. Knowledge of their unsanitary conditions and the despicable antics that occurred in them created unequivocal hostility. Severe health risks, particularly of contracting ophthalmia or venereal disease, were not adequately dealt with by the State until the 1870s, by which time countless men had been incapacitated to the point where they were all but unemployable upon their discharge and were only in receipt of a meagre pension that did not begin to compensate them for their loss. Poor conditions, coupled with corruptive elements, led to a degree of moral degeneration that caused particular concern among the Catholic population. Spiritual guidance was seen as essential, but the political battle between the Catholics and Liberals created vacuums in its application whilst under arms when the latter were in power. Not only did this go against the much cherished liberty of thought preached in Belgium, but it also deprived many men of their traditional source of sustenance. The

school debates brought this particular issue into sharp focus as it was believed that clerical education was not producing good enough results and was providing the army with men that were incapable of understanding what was demanded of them. Disciplinary issues were a persistent problem and opinion was divided over the root cause. Liberals tended to blame clerical education, Catholics emphasised linguistic prejudices. Flemish discrimination was a common narrative in nineteenth century Belgium, particularly in the army. Whether it was the determining factor in the higher number of Flemish disciplinary cases is difficult to categorically establish but certainly conditions were made more difficult for them in the courts-martial process that only recognised the use of French until the beginning of the twentieth century. Language was only part of the issue. The severity of punishments that the youth of the nation was subjected to became increasingly detached from the social ideals of a modern society that was following a wider European trend of humanitarianism. Various forms of incarceration, coupled with extensive periods of hard labour in poor conditions, brought the debate full circle and once again demonstrated the inadequacies of the army's attempt to be the moralising 'school of the nation'. Its out-dated practices failed to establish an enduring tradition of paternalism in its officers and meant that by the outbreak of the First World War, the Belgian Army was somewhat detached from the society from which it was drawn.

Chapter 4 - The Auxiliary Forces

Despite the regular army assuming primacy in the role of defending Belgian integrity from Dutch aggression during the 1830s, it was the nascent State's citizen militias that had taken the initiative during the September Revolution and upon whose basis the armed forces were nominally established. Article 122 of the Constitution provided for the continued existence of a Civic Guard, whereas the army required parliamentary consent, albeit a formality, to raise its annual levies. Inspired and partially borne out of the French National Guard and Dutch *Schutterij* as a counterweight to anarchy and despotism, this amateur force, which safeguarded its principles through the election of officers up to the rank of captain inclusive, formed a recognisable backbone to national security and internal law and order.³⁸⁴ Nevertheless, its popularity as an institution proved more theoretical than practical. Much like the army, the Civic Guard conscripted all able-bodied men, with a few exemptions, between the ages of 21 and 50 – latterly 21 and 40 - with the financial means to equip themselves, establishing what Frans Van Kalken has referred to as an 'instrument of class'.³⁸⁵ Despite predominantly engaging the urban *bourgeoisie* with an ideal motive for service, as a group, they were no more inspired by a Rousseauian ideal of social duty through their participation in the Civic Guard, than they had been through their exorbitant efforts to escape the army's annual ballot.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁴ Jacobs: 'Les Emblèmes', vol. 19, no. 8. (1972), p. 695; and J. Verschaeren: 'De Burgerwacht te Sint-Niklaas-Waas: Een historisch onderzoek naar het wezen van een grondwettelijke instelling in de 19e eeuw', *Revue Belge d'Histoire Militaire*, vol. XIX, no. 7 (September, 1972), p. 595.

³⁸⁵ F. Van Kalken, 'Ce que fut la Garde civique belge', *Revue Internationale d'histoire militaire*, no. 20 (1959), p. 550.

³⁸⁶ It has been argued that the very existence of the French National Guard expressed a voluntary subordination to the law and, as such, a general intent to engage with the

This decline in enthusiasm and participation gradually translated into unpreparedness for their dual role as an aid to the civil power and as a support to the regular army. In maintaining its largely bourgeois composition, the Civic Guard was nominally well poised to deal with the proletarian threat of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Yet, its political orientation towards Liberalism, which was to be expected from a predominantly urban force, made it more prone to support the socialist movement against the Catholic Government after 1884. This resulted in *les bleus* – the infantry formations of the Civic Guard – and *les vertes* – the mounted and artillery volunteer units known as the *Corps Spéciaux*, being considered increasingly unreliable. The Constitution, which protected the few remaining aspects of the force's revolutionary essence, prevented the necessary organisational reform required to establish it as an effective military support for both State and army. Consequently, its presence waned with time as local authorities turned increasingly to the regular army and the Gendarmerie – itself an institution reconstituted from the Dutch *Maréchaussées* – to provide unconditional support in times of crisis.³⁸⁷ When faced with the prospect of an external threat, the Civic Guard was perceived as being even less effective, despite repeated attempts to militarise it. Similar obstacles were placed in the way of reformers, who were combatting both a deep-rooted anti-militarism as well as Constitutional safeguards in their battle to emulate the Prussian system. While many Civic Guardsmen welcomed the proposed changes that would reinvigorate the institution, the 1897 Law achieved little in the way of establishing it as a suitable reserve for the army either. Ultimately, it meandered into the twentieth century as a force that had been

notion of a social contract. L. Girard, *La garde nationale 1814 – 1871* (Librairie Plon, Paris), p. 8.

³⁸⁷ KLM (ed.), *Histoire de la Gendarmerie* (Ghesquière and Partners, Brussels, 1979), p. 263.

marginalised by the State, army and society over successive generations and was now recognisable only for its distinctive hats and with a reputation for military ineffectiveness.

During the bloody days of August and September 1830, the capital's *bourgeoisie* took measures to arm itself in order to protect individual and property rights. By the time of its formal recognition, the 864 volunteers present constituted the only recognisable, armed force in the city prepared to retain order.³⁸⁸ Across the country, sporadic corps were being established for similar purposes as well as to aid the revolutionary cause. Such a movement could not be ignored and the Provisional Government decreed on 30 September that the *Garde Urbaine Bruxelloise* be organised into an official corps, which was later extended to encompass all such units on 26 October under the banner of the Civic Guard. It was formalised in law on 31 December and, in so doing, passed from the realms of a spontaneous expression of civil will to an organised body under State jurisdiction. Moreover, devolved organisation to municipal authorities and recruitment by commune did little to reassert the spirit of the Revolution. The decentralisation of government was fundamental to the new regime but even this people's army struggled to retain its liberty of action outside of the urban centres in which it was solely constituted after 1848 and even here its autonomy was questionable.

With the possible exception of the *Corps Spéciaux*, which saw wealthy volunteers with a martial spirit form independent mounted and artillery units, the Civic Guard, as an institution, relinquished an even greater proportion of its original essence

³⁸⁸ J. Verschaeren: 'De Burgerwacht te Sint-Niklaas-Waas', vol. XIX, no. 8 (December 1972), p. 672.

with the introduction of conscription after 1848. Despite solidifying its bourgeois composition through an obligation to furnish one's own uniform at an expense of approximately 60 francs, its organisation upon military lines detracted from its appeal. Divided initially into three bands comprising of unmarried men without children aged 21 to 30, unmarried men without children aged 31 to 50, and finally the rest, escaping service from the regulars through replacement or substitution appeared to offer little reward. Certainly, training was less frequent, though nonetheless onerous - reduced from twelve to eight days annually in 1853 following a string of complaints – and the unsanitary barracks were entirely avoided. Nevertheless, the fact that both the civil and military authorities possessed the power to call men out to serve anywhere in the country gave the impression of little differentiation between auxiliary and regular service, resulting in a number of men concocting excuses or even moving domicile in order to escape the charge.³⁸⁹

The Civic Guard's utility was increasingly questioned during the 1830s as both internal and external threats subsided. The burden of militarisation coupled with severe lack of funds for facilities and equipment did little to reignite a desire for service among its members. It was briefly revived in spectacular fashion as a result of its performance during the *Risquons-Tout* troubles of 1848 but once again waned with the passing of the immediate danger. The 1853 revision of the 1848 Law dictated that only cities and agglomerated communes with a population above 10,000, or towns dominated by a fortress, could retain an active Civic Guard. Previously, the threshold had been as low as 3,000 inhabitants. This resulted in a reduction in the number of units and the overall establishment from 1848 onwards, when thirty-two legions – a term denoting a force of approximately 1,600 guards – received their colours for services rendered, were

³⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 678.

reduced to just twenty in 1860; twenty-one in 1875; and twenty-four in 1893.³⁹⁰ In numbers, this saw just 29,274 active Civic Guards in 1860, translating to 0.6% of the population, rising minimally to 43,311 in 1893, equivalent to 0.7%. Its non-active establishment was far more imposing, numbering some 200,400 men in 1860, though it existed principally on paper.³⁹¹

The 1897 Law altered the organisation of the Civic Guard further, creating just two active bands, comprising of men aged 21 to 32 and 33 to 40 respectively. This was a policy aimed at reducing the military burden upon society by releasing those who were too old to be of military value whilst increasing its military proficiency. Effectiveness, it was hoped, would offset the loss in numbers. Training was increased in the first band to thirty, two-hour training sessions for the first year of service, and ten such sessions for those in the second band who had not previously received any training. A proficiency test was required and, if passed, saw guards expected to attend just ten exercises per year in the first band and three in the second. Even the uniform, which had undergone a series of minor alterations in the preceding decades to recapture the bourgeois spirit, was remilitarised with the mandatory addition of the *capote* and *havre-sac*.³⁹² For the government, who had been toying with the idea of introducing voluntary enlistment in the regular forces, a more militarily effective Civic Guard provided a further buffer against the introduction of obligatory service.

³⁹⁰ Jacobs, 'Emblèmes', vol.19, no. 8, p. 709; Exposé 1860, Tome II, p. 504-505; Exposé 1875, Tome I, p. 369; and AER Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, Pos.2515/372, Tabular recapitulation of Civic Guard organisation in annex of Chamber of Representatives debate, 24 March 1893.

³⁹¹ Exposé 1860, Tome II, p. 506.

³⁹² Exposé 1900, Tome I, p. 398.

Supporting the Civic Guard in its internal policing role was the Gendarmerie. Its organisation and recruitment was, naturally, even more militarised and regulated than its auxiliary counterpart, ensuring a much more stable existence and increasingly prominent role. As early as 24 October 1830, the Dutch Government called upon all men of the *Maréchaussée* to return to the Netherlands to resume service against the Belgian revolutionaries. Only a minority did so. Significantly, 18 officers chose to remain in Belgium and resume service under the Provisional Government.³⁹³ Among them, was the iconic figure of Lieutenant Prudent-Joseph Deladière whose initiative had inspired this realignment of allegiance after he rode at the head of 140 horsemen from Mons to Brussels on the 1 October to demonstrably lend a hand to the revolutionary effort.³⁹⁴ After providing useful service to the 3rd Heavy Cavalry Brigade in 1831 and 1832, the military squadrons were disbanded and the force assumed its dual peacetime role of maintaining internal law and order as well as acting as military provosts.

Administratively, the Gendarmerie was divided into three territorial divisions (subsequently four and then five Groups in 1908 and 1913 respectively) of three companies each. The 1st Division covered the regions of Brabant, Hainaut and Namur, the 2nd Division, oversaw Antwerp and the two Flanders, and the 3rd Division covered Liège, Limbourg and Luxembourg. These were then subsequently broken down into a further twenty-seven Lieutenancies – usually the large cities – and then into 191 Brigades, establishing a wide geographical distribution of State force across the country. By 1875 this had been increased to 211 Brigades and by the turn of the century to a comprehensive 329. In 1860, it could boast an establishment of 40 officers and

³⁹³ *Gendarmerie*, p. 215.

³⁹⁴ B. Dupuis and J. Balsaen: *Souvenirs d'un corps d'élite. La Gendarmerie Belge* (La Renaissance du Livre, Tournai, 2001), p. 19.

1,327 men (909 mounted and 418 on foot). By 1875 this had risen to 46 officers and 1,551 men (1,086 mounted and 486 on foot) and by 1900 there were 65 officers and 2,843 men under arms (1,727 mounted and 1,116 on foot).³⁹⁵ This increase of 214% in under half a century was symptomatic of its value in aiding the civil power during the turbulent years that accompanied the rise of socialist agitation in many urban centres. By the outbreak of war it totalled an incredible 3,696.³⁹⁶

Recruitment for the Gendarmerie was very different from the Civic Guard and was based on the French and Dutch systems out of which it had spawned. Engagements were for six years, reduced to four or two for those who had completed a Regular engagement. Ideally, only ex-servicemen of five years' experience with exemplary conduct records were to be admitted, in addition to the general criteria of being unmarried, under forty years of age, literate and above the height threshold of 170 centimetres (5'7") for foot soldiers and 173 centimetres (5'8") for mounted troops. In times of poor recruitment, these parameters were naturally bent to a certain degree, and civilians were even enrolled providing they met the majority of them. For example, between 1849 and 1852, out of 373 men recruited into the Gendarmerie, 82 had been NCOs in the regular army, 202 had been private soldiers and 89 had had no previous military experience.³⁹⁷ The proportion of NCOs was indicative of the nature and role of the force, which was required to remain detached from the civilian population in the performance of its duty, which quite often was carried out by small groups of three or four men alone. The necessity for good characters to maintain discipline was paramount.

³⁹⁵ Exposé 1860, Tome II, pp. 359-361; Exposé 1875, Tome I, pp. 436-442; and Exposé 1900, Tome I, p. 478.

³⁹⁶ KLM, *Gendarmerie*, p. 274.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 269. The figure of 82 NCOs was actually split between the designations of 16 'NCOs', and 66 'corporals and *brigadiers*'.

From its inception, the bourgeois character of the Civic Guard was never in doubt. The obligation to furnish their own uniforms, coupled with a desire to protect their stake in the establishment, provided both a physical and abstract restriction to the more undesirable elements of society from taking part. Complete, or even sufficiently informative, roll books for the Civic Guard are rare and make a consistent temporal and geographical analysis of its social composition difficult to accurately determine, though a general impression can still be obtained from the isolated study of a number of individual units over the course of the century. For example, Richard Coenen's study of 367 Antwerp guards in 1838 underscored the perception of the Civic Guard as a bourgeois institution by asserting that 75.4% of them belonged to some form of trade or industry.³⁹⁸ By the end of the century, this appears to have altered little in the country's urban centres. A sample of 1,004 guards from Brussels in 1897 suggests that 69.73% belonged to a similar demographic of shop men, clerks, mechanics and artisans.³⁹⁹ In contrast, however, an examination of an active rural unit in West Flanders in 1848 revealed an altogether different, though not entirely unsurprising, social composition. Of the 140 listed occupations, 99 were farmers which, with the addition of a single shepherd, accounted for 71.43% of the establishment, compared to just 26.44% employed in trade or industry.⁴⁰⁰ Whilst this clearly reflects the occupational

³⁹⁸ Coenen, 'De Politieke en Sociale Gebondenheid', p. 322.

³⁹⁹ AER Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, Pos.2515/372, Enrolment lists of the Brussels Civic Guard, 1897. Data computed from 1,004 database entries. It must be noted that not all listed names had the same information attached, meaning that calculations were often derived from a smaller sample.

⁴⁰⁰ Rijksarchief Kortrijk, (RAK) 301/13-1364, Gemeentearchief Deerlijk, Nominative roles of men composing the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Companies of the Deerlijk Civic Guards taken on 21 July 1848. Data computed from 143 database entries. Similarly, It must be noted that not all listed names had the same information attached, meaning that calculations were often derived from a smaller sample.

complexion of the urban-rural divide, it equally demonstrates the popularity and extension of the force in response to the upheaval of 1848. Notwithstanding, once the immediate danger had passed and service was again burdensome, many of these units were disbanded under the revised Law of 1853.

Indeed, by the time that the 1867 Recruiting Commission discussed the proposition of recasting the Civic Guard into a reserve force similar to the Prussian *Landwehr*, the urban dominance had once again been re-established. In seeking to raise 30,000 men for this task, the committee suggested that there were approximately 150,000 untapped *campagnards* who were eligible for service but for the law restricting active Civic Guard units to the major towns and cities.⁴⁰¹ This was deemed too large a number and the matter was dropped. However, with the passing of time, a simmering discontent began to be expressed regarding the obvious injustice of the system. A proposed article in the 1897 Law allowing the Government to decide which rural areas to agglomerate for the purposes of raising a Civic Guard battalion appeared arbitrary to say the least. Residents of Antwerp, for example, became agitated when it was discovered that the city dwellers would be compelled to serve in the force whilst the inhabitants of the neighbouring suburbs of Berchem and Borgerhout were likely to escape the charge. Moreover, this was not a new phenomenon. It transpired that politicians seeking election had, for some time, been garnering votes on the basis of promises to use their influence in Parliament to avoid the extension of the Civic Guard into their localities.⁴⁰² It very much reflected the sentiment expressed in *La Belgique Militaire* in 1871, which stated that the respectable elements of society would not wish to fight at the critical hour if other social groups – particularly labourers – were not

⁴⁰¹ Comm 1867, 15th Meeting, 10 April 1867.

⁴⁰² *L'Opinion*, 3 and 4 January 1897.

equally compelled to. Yet they, along with the authorities, would be similarly disinclined to constitute it on an egalitarian basis for fear of exposing it to the influence of the International and, in so doing, creating an instrument of revolution.⁴⁰³ This was just one of the many dichotomies of the Civic Guard that persisted beyond the 1897 reform.

As part of an attempt to re-militarise the force, the age parameters of the two active bands were altered and the upper age limit was reduced from 50 to 40. Coenen's analysis of the Antwerp Civic Guard in 1838 revealed that 56.4% of men were under the age of 35, with the majority falling between 30 and 35.⁴⁰⁴ By contrast, the *Deerlijk* companies only counted 24.48% of their recruits between the same ages. Their proportion of younger men was higher by 12% whilst there was only one man above the age of 40 in its ranks.⁴⁰⁵ This was partly a result of its occupational composition, which saw many more labourers (farmers in *Deerlijk*'s case) among its ranks, whose average age was between one and two years lower than men in trade or industry. An examination of the Brussels Civic Guard both before and after the introduction of the 1897 Law bears out this correlation even further. As demonstrated in Figure 4.1, the overall average age of an urban unit dominated by typically bourgeois occupations was as high as 36.48 before the reform and 31.33 after it. Unsurprisingly it was the Second Band whose average age fell dramatically by six years as opposed to the First Band's. This was largely a result of the higher ages associated with the trading classes who accounted for 41.52% of all departures on account of age.⁴⁰⁶ The effect on the social composition was only minor, with the professional and labouring classes slightly

⁴⁰³ *La Belgique Militaire*, 19 November 1871.

⁴⁰⁴ Coenen, 'Politiek', p. 322.

⁴⁰⁵ RAK, 303/13-1364, *Deerlijk* database.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, Brussels database.

Figure. 4.1. Occupational profile of the Brussels Civic Guard either side of the 1897 Law.⁴⁰⁷

		<i>Age</i>	<i>Professions</i>	<i>Shop men / Clerks</i>	<i>Mechanics</i>	<i>Artisans</i>	<i>Labourers</i>
<i>Pre 1897</i>	<i>1st Band</i>	28.15	19.09%	34.42%	7.29%	21.36%	17.84%
	<i>2nd Band</i>	42.89	12.96%	42.22%	9.81%	22.22%	12.78%
	<i>Overall</i>	36.48	15.45%	39.15%	8.78%	21.8%	14.82%
<i>Post 1897</i>	<i>1st Band</i>	27.13	18.48%	33.64%	8.18%	21.21%	18.48%
	<i>2nd Band</i>	36.62	15.91%	42.42%	7.58%	18.18%	15.91%
	<i>Overall</i>	31.33	17.34%	37.54%	7.91%	19.87%	17.34%

increasing their respective positions within it, but ultimately the status-quo was maintained albeit in a more physically able form.

If the labouring classes were comparatively absent in the regular units of the Civic Guard, then their presence in the *Corps Spéciaux* was effectively non-existent. These mounted and artillery units, generally restricted to populous cities or areas of strategic importance, formed the pinnacle of bourgeois militarism through recourse to voluntary enlistment. In his study of the Liège units, Francis Balace noted the presence of the *Liberal-bourgeoisie* in the *Chasseurs à Pied* and an even more upper-class composition in the artillery and cavalry corps.⁴⁰⁸ The cost of up to 100 francs more for equipment and eccentric uniforms inspired by the Second Empire, the equivalent to

⁴⁰⁷ AER Schollaert-Helleputte Papers, Pos.2515/372, Brussels database. These occupational groupings are taken from Spiers, *Victorian Army*, p. 130.

⁴⁰⁸ F. Balace, 'Soldats ou civils? La Garde Civique liègeoise en août 1914', *Revue Internationale d'Histoire Militaire*, vol. 29, (1970), p. 817. Prominent Liberal supporters such as the politician Paul Van Hoegarden and his successor Major E. Norifalisse, the Director-General of the Liègois Tramways, commanded the *Chasseurs à Pied*.

more than a month's salary for a well-paid worker, safeguarded their exclusivity.⁴⁰⁹ This was precisely what happened during the 1886 riots when a number of *Corps Spéciaux* were spontaneously raised in which many workers, who had decided not to strike, were unable to join their local units on account of the financial requirements.⁴¹⁰ This was not to say that men of lower standing were completely absent from these corps, particularly in 1886, but their zeal and willingness to sustain the burdens of time and cost after the immediate danger had passed certainly reduced their numbers.

Indeed, their social exclusivity was hardly ever in doubt under ordinary circumstances, especially given the presence of the nation's peerage in these formations. Amongst others, Count Frédéric de Mérode was killed in November 1830 serving with the *Chasseurs à Pied de Bruxelles* (along with the French actor Jenneval, who is largely believed to have written the lyrics to the *Brabançonne*), whilst the Marquis de Chasteleer formed and led what would become the first squadron of the *Chasseurs Éclaireurs* in February 1831. Even by 1867, the aristocracy's influence remained undiminished as Count Gaston d'Aerschot established the first of two companies of the *Chasseurs Belges Volontaires*.⁴¹¹ In the absence of enrolment lists, a detailed breakdown of their social composition is impossible, but it is not too implausible to suggest that a combination of their voluntary status, higher upkeep costs and aristocratic participation produced an even greater middle-class stranglehold within these units than in the ordinary formations.

⁴⁰⁹ Van Kalken, 'Ce que fut', p. 557; and MRA 288/97, Fonds Burgerwacht, Director General Ministry of the Interior to Superior Commander of the Garde Civique of Gent, 25 November 1897.

⁴¹⁰ R. Darquenne, *Les Warocqué et La Garde Civique* (Musée Royal de Mariemont, Morlanwelz, 1987), pp. 26-27.

⁴¹¹ For more on the formation of individual the *Corps Spéciaux* and other units of Brussels, see *Histoire de la Garde Civique de Bruxelles* (Musée Royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire Militaire, Brussels, 1979).

Often described as amateurs and belittled for displaying a misplaced pomposity and self-importance, these units ought to have been more readily commended for their solitary expression of a volunteering military tradition in Belgium.⁴¹² Those who recognised this feat often favourably compared them to the British Rifle Volunteers with whom they, and members of the Civic Guard in general, would come into contact on a number of occasions during the 1860s and 1870s for an annual shooting competition held alternately on Wimbledon Common and in Brussels. This coming together of amateur soldiery, which also included contingents from across Europe in the form of the Dutch *Schutterij* and French National Guard, was as much an exercise in marksmanship as it was an opportunity to share experiences and ideas. For the Belgian Civic Guard, it was an opportunity to observe the Rifle Volunteers whom they held in high esteem. It was hoped by many in Belgium that such encounters might inspire a similar middle-class militarism into units other than the *Corps Speciaux*. Intelligent men, as Lieutenant Verstrate noted in 1866, formed – or could form – a useful military force; the difficulty was to engage them willingly for a protracted period of time.⁴¹³ Ironically, however, Ian Beckett argued that by 1862 the social composition of the Volunteers had begun to change from ‘the original middle class ideal to a working class reality’.⁴¹⁴ This rather left the Belgians pining after an illusionary ideal, though not without reason. Despite this supposed difference in social composition between the two, it was the British contestants who were somewhat taken aback at the lack of social

⁴¹² *Le Belgique Militaire*, 30 April 1871.

⁴¹³ E. Verstrate, *De la Réorganisation de la Garde Civique et de son Adjonction a l’Armée de Campagne* (C. Muquardt, Brussels, 1866), p. 7.

⁴¹⁴ I.F.W. Beckett, *Riflemen Form*, pp. 73-74. For more on the British Rifle Volunteer Movement see also I.F.W. Beckett, *The Amateur Military Tradition 1558-1945* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1991) and H. Cunningham, *The Volunteer Force: A Social and Political History 1859-1908* (Archon Books, Hamden, Connecticut, 1975).

graces demonstrated by the exuberant Belgians in 1866. Their cries and shouts contrasted markedly with the tacit acceptance of the results by their British hosts.⁴¹⁵

The Civic Guard's officer corps represented the last vestige of the revolutionary spirit through the quinquennial election of its NCOs and officers up to the rank of Captain inclusive – with the exception of the Sergeant-Major who was nominated by the corps' Captain. The more senior ranks were appointed by the King upon being presented with a list of candidates nominated by the unit's newly elected junior officers. This system, although to be applauded for its endeavour in adhering not only to the Constitution but also to the essence of the original institution, proved to be more problematic through its abuses and inefficiency than it was worth. It furnished neither qualified nor apolitical men to these influential posts, which ultimately contributed, in part, to the force's eventual demise.

In terms of its social composition, the senior administrative and staff roles were almost exclusively the preserve of the professional classes. Of the twenty-eight officers to have occupied roles from Inspector General down to Chief of Staff of the Brussels Commander of the Civic Guard between 1831 and 1914, 12 were of a military background, nine were from the professions, six were merchants or civil servants, and one was classified as an agricultural labourer – although this individual was himself the son of an established Luxembourg landed family that had become impoverished during the French Revolution.⁴¹⁶ Similarly, of the 32 men to have commanded one of the three

⁴¹⁵ E.A. Jacobs: 'Garde Civique Belge et Riflemen Anglais', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 17. no. 4. (1967), p. 315.

⁴¹⁶ A database of 112 Civic Guard and 162 Gendarmerie entries has been compiled from the biographical entries in L. Keunings, *Les forces de l'ordre à Bruxelles au XIXe siècle: Données biographiques* (Ville de Bruxelles, Brussels, 2007) pp. 107-168 and 186-246. This has formed an officer database for both forces that will subsequently be referred to as 'Keunings Database'. It may be noted that in the event where a man's occupation was not listed but his father's was, the latter was used.

Brussels legions (subsequently two regiments) over the same period, two were soldiers, 14 were from the professions and six were merchants.⁴¹⁷ Finally, of the 40 men to have held the post of Commander of one of the Brussels *Corps Sepciaux*, a similar picture evolved. 13 were soldiers, 18 were from the professions, three were merchants, one was a plumber, two were artisans and two were not stated.⁴¹⁸ Not only does this demonstrate a firm grip on the senior ranks by the traditionally reliable classes of society, but also the purposeful appointment of men with military experience.

A not too dissimilar pattern can be found in the election of junior officers. Data from the 1894 election of the 12 non-active battalions in the province of Luxembourg demonstrates a degree of conscientiousness among the rank and file in appointing what were deemed more suitable candidates to the vacant roles (Figure. 4.2). In what was a rural region where the proportion of the labouring classes (i.e. farmers) was particularly high, it is noticeable that almost an equal number from the professions were elected to

Figure. 4.2. Social breakdown of junior officers from 12 non-active Luxembourg Civic Guard units.⁴¹⁹

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Professions</i>	<i>Shop men / Clerks</i>	<i>Mechanics</i>	<i>Artisans</i>	<i>Labourers</i>
<i>Captains</i>	34.62%	11.54%	7.69%	7.69%	38.46%
<i>Lieutenants</i>	11.54%	19.23%	3.85%	7.69%	57.69%
<i>Sub-Lieutenants</i>	9.62%	5.77%	7.69%	5.77%	71.14%

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ Archives d'État d'Arlon (AEA) 030/3-168, Data computed from election rolls of twelve companies in the Province of Luxembourg. These were: Athies, Attert, Aubange, Bellefontaine, Bonnert, Etalle, Messaney, Pelrunes, Rossignal, Saint-Vincent, Sélange, and Tintigny.

captaincies. More striking, even, was the inverse relationship between the professions and labouring classes when it came to the election of Lieutenants and Sub-Lieutenants. A concerted effort appears to have been made to appoint men of education and high standing within the local community to ranks with a larger degree of responsibility, and those of the more numerous farming class as subalterns. Not only was this a prudent measure in terms of binding a more intelligent class of recruit to the more taxing posts, but similarly ensuring that the more representative social group were in a position to liaise more readily with a rank and file of a comparable standing.

Unsurprisingly, this attempted professionalization, as seen in the Civic Guard, was far more common in the Gendarmerie. Indeed, every Inspector General, Corps Commander and Commandant of the 1st Division between 1830 and 1914 could boast a military or Gendarme background. Indeed, whereas the senior ranks in the Civic Guard were almost exclusively reserved as a final post in a military career (only two assumed another post afterwards), ten out of 36 senior officers in the Gendarmerie went on to re-enter the Regular army. Similarly, of the 33 Captains Commandant and Captains of the Brabant Company only four could claim to have come from a non-military career prior to entering the Gendarmerie.⁴²⁰ This homogeneity, experience and professionalism were not only imperative in the successful undertaking of its more strenuous tasks, but also provided local authorities with a guaranteed source of steel in times of social unrest, which was often found lacking in the Civic Guard.

Professionalism and quality were not always guaranteed through the election of officers in the Civic Guard, however. Although there were instances such as the aforementioned case in Luxembourg when candidates who nominally possessed the

⁴²⁰ Keunings Database.

right credentials were elevated to prominent positions, the very nature of quinquennial elections made the composition of the officer corps fluid, and more importantly, open to consistent and regular abuse. As early as 1832, reports were sent back from the provinces to the Minister of War, which demonstrated the inherent problem in entrusting uninformed men with a vote, particularly given how uncustomary it was in civilian life. Whereas the commune of Vielsam returned ‘satisfactory results’, the commander of Paliseul reported, ‘the choices, without being good, are the least bad possible’. Durbuy could look forward to being commanded by ‘ignorant and incapable officers’.⁴²¹ Over time, provisions were introduced to guard against incompetence, such as exam commissions with the power to dismiss both officers and NCOs who failed to meet the required standard. Nevertheless, the system remained fallible as only a minority of candidates were ever rejected and reports concerning the quality of command at all levels remained a cause for concern. Indeed, between 1861 and 1875, for example, 3,570 officer candidates and 4,259 NCO candidates were examined by the commission, of which only 75 and 72 respectively were dismissed on grounds of incompetence.⁴²²

Transgressions of an altogether worse nature were not uncommon. Reports of cliques developing amongst officers and men intent on rigging elections began to surface. *Le Courier de l’Escaut* related such a case in 1848, where senior officers managed to eliminate one of their peers from the list of candidates to be submitted for the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, despite his obvious popularity among the men.⁴²³ Likewise, *Le Progrès* claimed that malicious elements in Ypres had deliberately

⁴²¹ AEA 030/3-114, Tabular return of information regarding Luxembourg Civic Guard units sent to Governor of Luxembourg, 8 May 1832.

⁴²² Exposé 1875, Tome I, p. 368.

⁴²³ *Le Courier de l’Escaut*, 29 August 1848.

committed bureaucratic infractions to prevent an election from occurring in which they feared a negative result.⁴²⁴ These misdemeanours were not isolated events. Indeed, the Minister of the Interior, Gustave Rolin-Jaequemans, was so appalled by the extent of manipulation being used that he felt compelled to write a warning to the Governor of Brabant.⁴²⁵ Lists of candidates for senior ranks had been submitted with the intention of making one man alone stand out as the obvious choice for the nomination. This had been done by writing comments such as ‘complacent’, ‘would refuse the rank’ or ‘is unsuited’ next to the names of the alternatives, who in some extreme cases, were no more than fictitious characters who did not even appear on the enrolment registers.⁴²⁶ Thankfully for the Ministry, a law was in place that allowed them to reject or reformulate lists if they deemed it necessary.

Nevertheless, bias remained ever-present and, if not conducted on the grounds of personality, was often susceptible to political agitation. *L’Echo du Parlement* wrote on 11 February 1874 that the Civic Guard had a political character and it was decidedly Liberal. This had been preceded in 1873 with a report on officer elections in which the same newspaper stated; ‘On Sunday, the Civic Guard elections in Antwerp caused a lively agitation. *The victory belonged to the Liberals, because these elections were conducted on political grounds.*’⁴²⁷ The infiltration – almost monopolisation – of the Civic Guard’s senior ranks was seen as an attempt to turn the force into a party

⁴²⁴ *Le Progrès*, 23 April 1893.

⁴²⁵ Rolin-Jaequemans, Minister of the Interior from 1878 to 1884, left Belgium following the election defeat of 1886 and took up service as General Advisor to King Chulalongkorn of Siam in September 1892, reforming the country’s institutions and acting as a mediator during a 1893 crisis involving the French Empire. Upon returning to Belgium in 1901, he became a founding member of the Institute of International Law, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1904. *Biographie Nationale* (Académie Royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts), Tome 29, pp. 804-807.

⁴²⁶ MRA 289/174, Fonds Burgerwacht, Rolin-Jaequemans to Governor of Brabant, 21 June 1881.

⁴²⁷ *La Belgique Militaire*, 20 May 1883.

instrument. *Le Courier de l'Escaut* wrote: 'Everywhere where they were able to exclude the Catholics from obtaining positions as officers they made sure to do so, irrespective of the candidates' credentials or military capacities.'⁴²⁸ This appears to have been the case across the country. In Brussels, of the 23 Legion and Regiment Commanders whose political leanings were recorded, 20 were Liberals, two were Catholics and one was an Orangist serving immediately after the Revolution. A similar complexion was also found in the capital's *Corps Speciaux* commanders, where 20 of the 25 known cases were also of a Liberal persuasion.⁴²⁹ On the rare occasion where a Catholic candidate succeeded in overcoming the political hurdles to become elected, such as in Tournai in 1878, there were calls to build on this minor victory to wrest back the momentum from the Liberals in other units as well as in the communal elections.⁴³⁰ Given the political orientation of the urban *bourgeoisie*, typically Liberal, and the 1853 Law restricting the establishment of Civic Guard units outside of cities with a population of 10,000, this proved difficult to achieve. If the Catholics managed to largely restrain their political opponents' influence in the army after 1884, then the Liberals certainly achieved an equivalent stranglehold within the Civic Guard, the unintentional consequence of which was to intensify calls for the introduction of obligatory service in the army due to the continued incompetence emanating from an uninspiring, unqualified and ultimately biased officer corps.

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

⁴²⁸ *Le Courier de l'Escaut*, 8 May 1878; See also Coenen, 'Politiek', pp. 336-338.

⁴²⁹ Keunings Database.

⁴³⁰ *Le Courier de l'Escaut*, 10 May 1878.

The principal causes of weakness in the Civic Guard are: the election of officers by their subordinates; [...] the renewal of elections and nominations every five years; [...] the lack of exercises, the poor maintenance of armaments and the inefficiency of disciplinary measures, that imbues neither order, nor the respect of authority, nor strict and prompt obedience, without which an organised force does not exist.⁴³¹

The inflammatory remarks attacked not only the Constitutional guarantees protecting the election of officers, but questioned the latter's ability to adequately fulfil their task. The repercussions reverberated throughout the country, spurring many an indignant Civic Guardsman to pen riposts defending the institution, which, as officers, they were proud to serve. 'They have unanimously decided to protest [...] and I agree with all the points in their piece', wrote the Major-General of the Gent Civic Guard.⁴³² Whilst this indignation was to be expected, it could not mask the valid points raised in the pamphlet regarding the organisation of the Civic Guard, which, by extension, questioned its ability to meaningfully undertake either of its roles as an aid to the civil power or as a reserve force to the army.

The timing of the publication ought not to be forgotten in the analysis of its arguments. It formed part of the extensive literature in circulation following another resounding victory of the Prussian military system over what many had considered to be the best army in the world at the time. Unsurprisingly European states began a sustained period of self-assessment surrounding their armed forces and sought to emulate, to various degrees, the all-conquering Prussian model. Belgium was no

⁴³¹ A. Brialmont, *Ce Que Vaut la Garde Civique: Étude sur la Situation Militaire du Pays* (A.N. Lebègue et Compie, Brussels, 1872), p. 27.

⁴³² MRA 289/140, Fonds Burgerwacht, Major-General of the Gent Civic Guard to Lieut-General Renard, Inspector General of the Civic Guard, 25 December 1872.

different. As previously alluded to, the Recruitment Commission of 1867 was established in the wake of the Austro-Prussian War to discuss many of the same principles. Deliberation concerning the Civic Guard centred on this very debate: to what extent should the force act as an internal police force or, as was now the fashion, an equivalent to the Prussian *Landwehr*?

However, for those wishing to militarise the Civic Guard, the Constitution, guaranteeing its existence and elections, merely appeared archaic and a hindrance to the establishment of a viable role for the force in the modern world. Brialmont pointed out that its function as a counter-weight to a standing army may have been important in an age when it was comprised of mercenaries in the pay of a despotic monarch, but since it had, and would increasingly, become ‘a reunion of honourable citizens, representing all classes of society, they no longer pose[d] any danger to the liberties that they helped conquer and swore to defend.’⁴³³ In so doing, he brought the very essence of the Civic Guard’s existence into question, which again prompted swift retaliation. ‘The violent attacks, of which our institution was the object, [...] have profoundly affected the officer corps of the citizen militia in Antwerp and will not leave indifferent any good patriot attached to the Constitution, the King, public liberties and our rights’, was the reaction noted by Colonel David, who took great pride in the Civic Guard’s legacy of preserving communal liberties.⁴³⁴ Rhetoric concerning heritage was a common refrain amongst defenders of the institution. In 1895 a letter from De Vigneron to the then Minister of the Interior, François Schollaert, read,

The Civic Guard has traditions as respectable as they are old and uphold communal autonomy. [...] subordinating the conditions of existence of the

⁴³³ Brialmont, *Que Vaut*, pp. 21-22.

⁴³⁴ MRA 288/31, Fonds Burgerwacht, Colonel David of the Antwerp Civic Guard to Unknown, 20 December 1872; and *La Belgique Militaire*, No. 641, 20 May 1883.

Civic Guard to the general and hierarchical rules of the army, is to collide with an irreducible opposition and run towards a certain defeat.⁴³⁵

It merely served to exemplify the problem dividing the two schools of thought, who in their own ways put forward valid arguments. On the one hand, recent developments in warfare dictated the necessity to militarise amateur forces, but on the other the Civic Guard's unique position in the fabric of the nation made such a reform implausible.

The perseverance with the election process fundamentally denied the force the opportunity to become militarily effective. Not only did it elevate candidates to ranks for which they were entirely unsuited, but also undermined the ability of officers to exert any authority during their tenure for fear of losing their position at the ballot-box in five years time.⁴³⁶ As an article in *La Belgique Militaire* noted, it demonstrated a clear lack of prestige and standing by the citizen officers amongst their citizen men.⁴³⁷ Additionally, the disciplinary machinery was completely insufficient for the task. Officers often complained that their powers were so restricted as to be rendered effectively useless. As early as 1832, reports from Luxembourg illustrated the extent of the problem: 'Discipline is, to say the least, nil. The actions of the disciplinary councils cannot make themselves felt enough. Officers do not have enough power.'⁴³⁸ Little had changed by the end of the century, as demonstrated by an 1895 memorandum circulated by a group of senior officers. In it they explained how the system of reprimands were

⁴³⁵ AER Schollaert-Helleputte Papers Pos. 2515-372, De Vigneront to Schollaert, 21 August 1895.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., Transcript of Chamber of Representatives, Session of 24 March 1893. Anspach Project.

⁴³⁷ *La Belgique Militaire*, No. 18, 30 April 1871.

⁴³⁸ AEA 030/3-114, Tabular return of information regarding Luxembourg Civic Guard units sent to Governor of Luxembourg, 8 May 1832.

dead letters as any extra duties went against the law which regulated the maximum amount of time that a guard could be called out for service.⁴³⁹

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

I must not hide from you the sad truth concerning the situation of the Civic Guard in the province of Luxembourg. Here, perhaps more so than anywhere else, the youthful inheritors of the reputation of bravery of their ancestors, are full of enthusiasm for the cause of the September revolution and will not refuse to fight for *la patrie en danger*. However, in Luxembourg also, again maybe more so than everywhere else, the youth bends with difficulty to military discipline. Each wants to command, none wish to obey. Inactivity, or moreover, the recklessness of the majority of disciplinary councils, has completely demoralised the Civic Guard such as it is now organised.⁴⁴⁰

Guards in certain Luxembourg districts, as elsewhere around the country, began to regularly miss exercises, which were mandatory for the 1st Band, prompting a warning from de Theux.⁴⁴¹ Whereas the Governor could be expected to lay down the law to some who encouraged and even assisted absenteeism, such as the Mayor of Bouillon, there was little that could be done about the election and re-election of ‘imbeciles’

⁴³⁹ AER Schollaert-Helleputte Papers Pos. 2515-372, Demand of modifications to be made to the Law of 1848 by the Generals of Antwerp, Brussels and Liège, 19 February 1895.

⁴⁴⁰ AEA 030/3-114, Governor of Luxembourg to de Theux, 1 April 1832.

⁴⁴¹ AEA 030/3-317 De Theux to Governor of Luxembourg, 2 October 1832.

whose popularity stemmed from consistently turning a blind eye to such misdemeanours.⁴⁴²

This situation was comparable with that recorded by Colonel David in Antwerp half a century later. Having inspected the Civic Guard over four exercises in April and May 1879, David appeared content with the majority of the rank and file present under arms. However, the senior NCOs and officers left much to be desired, with the latter abusing their ability to grant exemptions – Captains often doing so without the consent of their superiors –, arriving late, demonstrating little enthusiasm in forming up their companies correctly, and generally exhibiting an ‘incredible weakness in their commands.’⁴⁴³ A report on the Civic Guard of Ixelles in 1900 demonstrated a problematic lack of uniformity in command between officers and NCOs, neither of which had a sufficient theoretical or practical knowledge to exercise control over the men. With company commanders applying their understanding in a different manner to that of Adjutant-Majors or even NCOs, the rank and file was left to feel ‘lost in the mass, without proper love, without interest and without initiative, marching against their wishes.’⁴⁴⁴ In Ypres, *Le Progrès* reported the extraordinary case of Colonel Van Halen’s, Chief of the General Staff, visit to inspect the Civic Guard only to find that a number had found the curiosities of the Antwerp Exposition too compelling to resist.⁴⁴⁵ Nevertheless, this was still an improvement on the *Chasseurs Éclaireurs* who were due to undertake some exercises and manoeuvres in Antwerp in the autumn of 1879 but

⁴⁴² AEA 030/3-318 Major of the Bouillon Civic Guard to Mayor of Bouillon, 20 August 1831; and *La Belgique Militaire*, 7 May 1871.

⁴⁴³ MRA 288/31, Fonds Burgerwacht, Colonel David to Officers and Sergeant-Majors of the Antwerp Civic Guard. Order of the Day. 21 May 1879.

⁴⁴⁴ MRA 98/A-zn-14, Fonds Burgerwacht, 1897-1920, Note on the Theoretical and Practical Instruction of Officers and Corporals of the Ixelles Civic Guard, 13 March, 1900.

⁴⁴⁵ *Le Progrès*, 28 June 1894.

were subsequently cancelled due to inclement weather, despite the perseverance of the army at the same location. Many auxiliaries later expressed their delight at the postponement until May as a result of having avoided contracting any sickness.⁴⁴⁶ Occurrences such as this brought the effectiveness and resilience of the force into serious doubt, providing further ammunition to those who wished to either dispense with it entirely or reconstitute it on much tougher military lines.

The situation was just as poor in Brussels by the end of the century. Over an eight-day period in October 1894, four Legions undertook a combined total of five exercises, which produced an average absence rate of 27.13%.⁴⁴⁷ Over the course of the year, the capital's Disciplinary Councils fined a total number of 2,988 out of 5,800 cases between two and 30 francs, with 44 being additionally incarcerated for up to five days. In total, the City of Brussels accrued 16,026 francs through fining absenteeism, though failed to significantly reduce its frequency.⁴⁴⁸ Indeed, as the courts-martial records indicate between 1861 and 1875, indiscipline in general had been increasing at an alarming pace for some time throughout the country. The number of fines rose from 2,155 cases to 7,005 over this period despite the number of men in ordinary service remaining fairly constant.⁴⁴⁹ Whilst it had been heard of for certain occupations, such as railway workers or even pawn-brokers, whose employment necessitated them to work on Sundays, to be granted absences, there were others who simply took liberties.⁴⁵⁰ Fraudulent absence certificates were still in circulation by 1909, which

⁴⁴⁶ *La Belgique Militaire*, 18 November 1877.

⁴⁴⁷ AER Schollaert-Helleputte Papers Pos. 2515-372, Demand of modifications to be made to the Law of 1848 by the Generals of Antwerp, Brussels and Liège, 19 February 1895.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁹ *Exposé 1875*, Tome I, p. 372.

⁴⁵⁰ MRA 289/143, Fonds Burgerwacht, Major-General of the Garde Civique of Gent to Unknown General, 25 April 1874.

recalcitrant individuals could obtain, signed and ready, from a neighbouring commune's supposed military authorities granting them permission on the grounds of presence elsewhere. Successive Ministers of the Interior attempted to curb this exploitation of the system by introducing third party witnesses for any such meeting.⁴⁵¹ Notwithstanding, the disruption caused to the Civic Guard's ability to train consistently and effectively had clearly been undermined for decades, stemming from the process of electing officers, and culminating in a significant contributing factor to the force's eventual demise.

The Constitutional requirements of the Civic Guard were not solely to blame for its lack of professionalization, however. Deficiencies in equipment and facilities, largely on account of financial restrictions, did little to improve the situation. Martial spirit, as demonstrated with the constant militarisation of the uniform, was inexorably linked with the materiel available. Apart from the derisory role often attributed to it, the main challenge to the Civic Guard's image both internally and externally centred on its weaponry.⁴⁵² To look the part was to be the part. Unsurprisingly, it often struggled to obtain adequate equipment in its embryonic form resulting in many units being issued with pikes as opposed to firearms.⁴⁵³ Reports from the 160 battalions in the province of Luxembourg showed that only four cantons (25 battalions) could classify their resources as 'complete'; two cantons (13 battalions) as 'good'; eight cantons (59 battalions) as 'good enough'; one canton (ten battalions) as 'conforming to the law'; one canton (ten battalions) as 'imperfect'; and three cantons (32 battalions) as

⁴⁵¹ AEA 030/3-317, De Trooz to Governor of Luxembourg, 21 November 1906; and Schollaert to Governor of Luxembourg, 31 March 1909.

⁴⁵² Verstraete, *Réorganisation*, p. 5.

⁴⁵³ Jacobs, 'Emblèmes', vol.19, no. 8, pp. 703-704.

simply ‘none’.⁴⁵⁴ Although some units were undoubtedly able to make do, the majority were not happy with the state of affairs. Indeed, it is evident that those battalions without the means to improve their situation, were liable to fold without financial support from the commune, as in the case of Sint-Niklaas in 1835.⁴⁵⁵

By the time the 1848 Law was introduced, an assessment of the weaponry available revealed equally galling deficiencies. It appeared that the Bouillon battalions were equipped with the 1777 model musket, of which 15 of the 48 available required serious repairs, and two were unserviceable.⁴⁵⁶ More concerning, was the evaluation by the Mayor of Fauvillers who claimed that all 131 guns necessitated the work of an experienced armourer in order to return them to working order. This was accompanied by a note that stated; ‘Few of these effects, be it guns or equipment, remain apt for service. Moreover, the guns are an antiquated model, which is too heavy to be handled by incompetent hands.’⁴⁵⁷ It reflected the opinion that amateur soldiery was less compatible with complicated weaponry, that despite being old, or perhaps on account of it, they were unable, through neglect or incompetence, to maintain it to a sufficient standard. It lessened their military impact as well as martial spirit, rendering them unsuited for the tasks at hand.

Civil authorities, both at governmental and local level, did attempt to alleviate some of the financial pressures placed on the auxiliary forces. The State naturally provided equipment for the Gendarmerie as a fully-fledged internal police force, in their

⁴⁵⁴ AEA 030/3-114, Tabular return of information regarding Luxembourg Civic Guard units sent to Governor of Luxembourg, 8 May 1832.

⁴⁵⁵ Verschaeren, ‘Sint-Niklaas’, no. 8, p. 679. Similar concerns were raised by Barthélemy Dumortier in Parliament the year before; Unionisme.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 26 April 1834.

⁴⁵⁶ AEA 030/3-235, Report on the armament and equipment of the Bouillon Civic Guard, 12 September 1848.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., Mayor of Fauvillers to Governor of Luxembourg, 10 July 1848.

case Albin rifles and Remington-Nagant pistols, but surprisingly did not take responsibility for their billets until the turn of the century. Prior to that, the cost of Gendarme barracks had been at the expense of the commune dating back to the Law of 30 April 1836. Under the new system, which sought to improve the conditions of service for the ever-expanding force, each man was, as much as possible, to have his own room, and married men were to be given separate family quarters. It was not achieved over night, as 179 Provincial barracks had to be bought back for interim use whilst the new lodgings were under construction. However, by the end of the year, 35 new buildings had already been completed.⁴⁵⁸

Spending on the Civic Guard was also primarily a communal and ultimately provincial responsibility, with the State providing a supportive role. Equipment and facilities took the lion's share of funds in each province and, by and large, their total outlay reflected the size of the Civic Guard within their geographical boundaries (Figure. 4.3). Until 1897 and the reform of the force, the State tended to roughly match the outlay of the highest spending province, Brabant, to be distributed across all nine. Following this, however, it quadrupled its financial support to propel its programme of militarisation into being.

Part of the State budget for the Civic Guard was indeed to promote a degree of militarism into society, through supporting the construction, maintenance and use of shooting ranges. From the inaugural *Grand Tir*, bank-rolled by Léopold II himself, through to subsequent events both home and abroad, the Civic Guard received financial aid to participate. In 1880, for example, Guardsmen were encouraged to compete in Vienna and were provided with the incentive of the latest Comblain rifles on loan for a deposit of 90 francs and 75 centimes, which would be returned to them after the

⁴⁵⁸ Exposé 1900, Tome I, p. 477.

competition.⁴⁵⁹ Good marksmanship was prized and improvements encouraged through obligatory target practice. Desire was often supplanted by necessity though, as demonstrated by the results of the Leuven Civic Guard's 200 metre shoots for the period 1906-1908. Its active first three companies averaged a paltry 54%, 52% and 59% hit rate of the target respectively in 1906, whilst the two companies of the demi-Battalion

Figure. 4.3. Average annual spending in Belgian Francs on Civic Guard units by province, 1875-1900.⁴⁶⁰

<i>Province</i>	<i>1875-79</i>	<i>1880-84</i>	<i>1885-89</i>	<i>1890-94</i>	<i>1895-97</i>	<i>1898</i>	<i>1899</i>	<i>1900</i>
<i>Antwerp</i>	30190	34485	40321	42973	42647	47099	52616	92089
<i>Brabant</i>	84984	99399	104883	117494	118995	131025	150609	136396
<i>W. Flanders</i>	14593	15195	20467	19840	21817	20433	26211	23887
<i>E. Flanders</i>	29285	32878	45731	36155	39829	30843	40215	36090
<i>Hainaut</i>	14494	16206	41748	43428	47789	47120	61646	63297
<i>Liège</i>	24361	28710	34426	36902	39784	37736	57569	43410
<i>Limbourg</i>	852	819	876	817	660	777	3325	3225
<i>Luxembourg</i>	1552	1646	1709	1753	1811	1905	2518	2228
<i>Namur</i>	5877	6658	6186	6422	6195	5925	10228	10104
<i>Total</i>	206188	235996	296347	305784	319527	322863	404937	410726
<i>State</i>	99540	112904	129301	115098	118552	401442	466748 *	474554
<i>Absolute Total</i>	305728	348900	425648	420882	438079	724305	871685	885280

⁴⁵⁹ AEA 030/3-321, Rolin-Jaquemyns to Governor of Luxembourg, 26 June 1880.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 399.

of the Second Band recorded scores of just 45% and 42%. The situation had improved somewhat by 1908 during which the 3rd Company of the First Band achieved a commendable 82% average across the three shoots in different poses, albeit against a low precedent.⁴⁶¹ 43,000 francs was provided by the State for target practice alone in 1897, rising to 75,000 by 1900, but whilst it could provide for some new and improved facilities, Belgium had twenty-two ranges of 100m or more by 1900, it still fell short of what was required.⁴⁶² The Ministry of the Interior's official report following the General Inspection of 1911 justly appeared satisfied with the progress in the quality of marksmanship among the Civic Guard but lamented the continued lack of ranges beyond the country's urban centres. It noted the importance of such facilities by recognising 'The confidence that a man has in his weapon and in his ability to use it is, for him, the best guarantee of his moral strength in critical circumstances.'⁴⁶³

Barring a minor role in the Army of Observation during the Franco-Prussian War, the only active service that the Civic Guard had to undertake in facing up to an external threat following the peace with the Netherlands in 1839 was the First World War. Between these two events, their role lay predominantly in the sphere of internal policing, for which they were only marginally more suited. From the outset, one of the main difficulties faced by the authorities in the deployment of the Civic Guard in such a role was the complicated process of calling them out. The local mayor, the mayor of a neighbouring commune, the Provincial Governor, *Commissaires d'Arrondissement*

⁴⁶¹ MRA, 98/A-zn-17, Fonds Burgerwacht, 1897-1920, Results of the Leuven Civic Guard's shooting exercise over 200 metres, 1908.

⁴⁶² Exposé 1900, Tome I, p. 396.

⁴⁶³ Ministry of the Interior, *Administration de la Garde Civique et de la Milice: Inspections générales de 1911* (Guyot Frères Éditeurs, 1911), pp. 7-8.

and Justices of the Peace in the civilian domain, as well as the local military authority or the territorial commander, could nominally make this decision. Charles Dubois argued in the Chamber that this was a result of the haste in which territorial boundaries had been established for the Civic Guard in 1830 – either by canton or justices of the peace – which had then not been amended when the new district, judiciary and cantonal demarcations were established.⁴⁶⁴ This led to some disagreements, and subsequent delays, as in the Daine-Dollain affair, which sparked a debate in 1842 between the War and Interior Ministries as to who had ultimate control. Similarly, in response to anti-Catholic riots in 1857, General Adolphe Alexis Capiaumont believed in his right to instigate pre-emptive military measures in Gent by mobilising the 600 men under his command without the consent of the mayor, causing a considerable political storm in the process. The army did not contest the civil authorities' control during peacetime, but in the event of their embodiment to face a threat to the State, they felt that the territorial military commander held a higher rank than the provincial governor or the local mayor, and as such had the right to seize the initiative.⁴⁶⁵ It remained somewhat undetermined, although increased emphasis was placed on the mayor to assess the local situation before acting accordingly.

Irrespective of where the power of command rested, the more pressing issue undoubtedly lay in the level of trust that could be placed in the Civic Guard when it was eventually called out to face an internal crisis. During disturbances in Brussels on 6 April 1834, the citizen militia had remained conspicuously absent on account of there

⁴⁶⁴ Unionisme.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 26 May 1834.

⁴⁶⁵ For more on this, see P. Lefèvre: 'Le Maintien de l'ordre au niveau provincial', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 25, no. 3 (1983), pp. 201-229. For the Capiaumont Affair, see L. Keunings, Luc 'L'armée et le maintien de l'ordre au XIXe siècle. L'affaire Capiaumont (1857)', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 30, no. 7 (1994), pp. 493-540.

being no military presence to be of support, leading to many guards preferring to remain at home to defend their own families and properties.⁴⁶⁶ The irony was that at this stage the general rule, as Léopold I retrospectively explained to Chazal in 1861, was ‘all civil strife must be repressed by the local police force, supported by the citizen militia; the army cannot, and must not, get involved, whilst these forces have not been beaten.’⁴⁶⁷ Similar concerns were raised in Luxembourg too, where in Marche the political character and martial spirit was deemed suspect as a result of a large number of Orangist sympathisers. Despite the remainder of the province boasting either an ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ disposition towards the new order, it was feared that it would dissipate the further they were taken from their homes.⁴⁶⁸ In these early years, when Orangist agitation was relatively easily controlled, the dependability of the Civic Guard was not as important as it might have been. Nevertheless, it remained a concerning portent for things to come.

The first real test came in the Year of Revolutions, 1848, known in Belgium as the *Risquons Tout* affair in which the Civic Guard acquitted itself relatively well. A group of Belgian republicans and Francophiles, together with some Frenchmen, formed the *Légion Belge* with the support of the Provisional Government in Paris. Their aim was to extend republicanism to Belgium but they were beaten back by a combined effort of Civic Guards, Gendarmerie and the army at a cost of just one dead and six wounded.⁴⁶⁹ It proved to be the zenith of the Civic Guard’s participation in the maintenance of order after 1830. Royal, and by extension, national recognition of their

⁴⁶⁶ Unionisme.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 20 April 1834.

⁴⁶⁷ Anonymous, *La Répression des Émeutes par la Garde Civique: Conférence* (Ongers-Mols, Brussels, 1882), pp. 9-11.

⁴⁶⁸ AEA 030/3-114, Tabular return of information regarding Luxembourg Civic Guard units sent to Governor of Luxembourg, 8 May 1832.

⁴⁶⁹ H. Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique* Tome IV, p. 424.

accomplishments was shown through the awarding of colours to 34 Legions across the country.⁴⁷⁰ This was further corroborated by the commissioning of commemorative engravings to be distributed among these units to be kept as a souvenir in their archives.⁴⁷¹ Its reinvigorated image, through its willingness and military capacities, also helped propel the 1848 Law into being. Although initially seen as a positive solidifying piece of legislation guaranteeing the institution's continued existence, it soon became a double-edged sword with increased the burden that accompanied an expanded role.

By the time of the social upheaval of the 1886 riots, the Civic Guard had already, as has been demonstrated, begun to decline. What were initially no more than isolated disturbances in the previous year in Hainaut, Brussels and Antwerp spontaneously erupted into a national strike. The conflagration, centred in the Meuse basin, created a domino effect across factories of all industries that were literally set ablaze. The influx of American cereals had added further pressure to the European economic crisis of 1884, which finally reached boiling point two years later. Salaries dropped and unemployment rose.⁴⁷² The severity of the situation had initially been lost on the authorities, but it soon became evident that a large-scale mobilisation of the *Force Publique* would be required to restore order. On occasion, such as in Roux where 5,000 workers had caused one million francs-worth of damage to the glassworks factories, the army was called out to offer support to brutal and bloody effect. Following a failed charge by some 30 Lancers, the infantry opened fire killing 12 rioters, which swiftly broke their spirit and drew matters to a close.⁴⁷³ Such extreme expressions of violence had come to be expected from the army and Gendarmerie and reinforced the need for a

⁴⁷⁰ Jacobs, 'Emblèmes', vol. 20, no. 2, p. 148.

⁴⁷¹ AEA 030/3-119, Rogier to Governor of Luxembourg, 5 January 1850.

⁴⁷² Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique*, Tome V, pp. 115-116.

⁴⁷³ KLM, *Gendarmerie*, p. 261.

strong Civic Guard to take more moderate control of the situation. However, the Government's decision to call for the spontaneous creation of *Corps Spéciaux* to counter the immediate threat was a clear indication of how the institution had meandered its way into idleness over the preceding decades.

Largely on account of its lack of training, the Civic Guard was often not placed in the direct line of fire for fear of what inexperience might produce. Indeed, in the Tournai area where 600 rioters were confronted by the Civic Guard, the *Chasseurs Éclaireurs* and the Gendarmerie, it was the latter two who undertook the more strenuous roles. Whilst the Civic Guard secured the Hôtel de Ville, the Gendarmerie charged twice amidst a hail of rocks, causing enough casualties in sabre and gunshot wounds to break the riotous group and restore order.⁴⁷⁴ The Gendarmerie took the plaudits on this occasion, but the Civic Guard had received its own in Charleroi the previous day for the steadfastness and restraint shown. *Le Bien Public* noted in glowing, albeit somewhat surprised terms, 'It was the first encounter that, in these circumstances, our citizen militia has had with the disturbers of the peace, and we can confirm that it came out with its honour intact. Our congratulations to the commanders; they proved that they could couple energy with moderation.'⁴⁷⁵ Notwithstanding, the performance of the Civic Guard was not convincing to everyone. An 1886 pamphlet by an officer of the Civic Guard rightly pointed out that its units did not actually do very much, and what it did do, it did in self-defence and at higher material and manpower cost than the army or the Gendarmerie.⁴⁷⁶ Indeed, as Pierre Leclercq has pointed out, the perception was very much that the Civic Guard was 'two-paced', with the *Corps Spéciaux*

⁴⁷⁴ *Le Bien Public*, 30 March 1886.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 29 March 1886.

⁴⁷⁶ Goffinet, *De l'Inutilité et du Danger de la Garde Civique aux points de vue Politique & Militaire* (Alexandre Berqueman, Brussels, 1886), pp. 23-30.

demonstrating the virtues of a good attitude and military training in contrast to *les bleus* whose shortages in both aspects saw them relegated to a peripheral role.⁴⁷⁷

Whilst some units were clearly proving to be of use as an aid to the civil power, others began to demonstrate the reasons why the ‘mayor’s army’, as it had come to be known, slowly lost the trust of those with the power to call it out.⁴⁷⁸ In Chanly, a small town in the Province of Luxembourg situated approximately 30 miles west of Bastogne, the Mayor wrote with alarm to the *Commissaire d’Arondissement* concerning the turn-out rate of the non-active units under his authority who had been called out to offer protection to nearby factory buildings and their owners. The letter read, ‘The majority of the Civic Guard lends itself willingly to this chore, however, there are a certain number of recalcitrant members who, not only do not want to undertake any service but, are attempting to dissuade those who are well disposed.’⁴⁷⁹ Despite not providing a reason for such an act of sedition, conclusions may still be drawn from similar protests seen in 1902, when guards refused to conduct repressive acts on account of conscience or political grounds. The changing social and political landscape of Belgium towards the end of the nineteenth century altered the perception of many liberal thinkers within the force.

Frans Van Kalken has attempted to underplay the political issues preventing the Civic Guard from fulfilling its duties as an aid to the civil power by claiming that, apart from an incident of mass disobedience by the Brussels corps in 1834 in which some 6,000 men refused to put down an anti-orangist demonstration, no other serious refusal

⁴⁷⁷ P. Leclercq, *Histoire de la Garde Civique: L’Exemple du Bataillon des Chasseurs-Éclaireurs de Liège* (Labor Quai du commerce, Brussels, 2005), p. 117.

⁴⁷⁸ This term has appeared in both, Van Kalken, ‘Ce que fut’, p. 549; and Balace, ‘Soldats ou civils?’, p. 817.

⁴⁷⁹ AEA 030/3-322, Mayor of Chanly to the Commissaire d’Arondissement, 9 April 1886.

to soldier undermined the force.⁴⁸⁰ He notes that only three of the 35,000 guards mobilised during the 1902 crisis, including the eminent lawyer Paul Spaak, refused to load their rifles. However, reports of entire platoons revolting, offering to fund the strikes themselves and running amok whilst singing the *Marseillaise*, somewhat refute that assertion.⁴⁸¹ Spaak, the father of the future Socialist Prime Minister of Belgium and Secretary-General of NATO, Paul-Henri Spaak, was undoubtedly a vocal critic of the use of force in this matter, but certainly by no means just one of three. He expressed his views in an open letter in *Le Peuple* explaining the motivations behind his refusal to participate, which he believes was mirrored in other guards. It is worth quoting at length:

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

⁴⁸⁰ Van Kalken, 'Ce que fut', pp. 556-557.

⁴⁸¹ *Le Peuple*, 20 April 1902.

certainly many other guards would do, though I understood that this would be betraying the confidence that this man, who would honestly be doing what he judged to be his duty, had in me.⁴⁸²

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

Rare incidents, such as that outside of Franz Schollaert's home, in which the Civic Guard shot eight protestors whilst helping the Gendarmerie shepherd the Minister of the Interior inside, only helped fuel the fire. *Le Peuple*, which reported the affair, exclaimed 'The Government of murderers must go!', reinforcing the moral of Spaak's appeal.⁴⁸³ It placed the Civic Guard in an impossible position, attempting on the one hand to fulfil its Constitutional duty of securing internal order in a time when socially, politically and militarily it was not up to the task. The bourgeois element that for so long could be counted on by the State to curb dangerous social movements appeared to have somewhat dissipated under the Catholic dominance in government. Only twice was it reported that the 'instrument of class' was used in such a manner, killing six miners in Mons in April 1893 and a further nine at a demonstration for universal

⁴⁸² Ibid., 16 April 1902.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., 19 April 1902.

suffrage in Leuven in 1902. The latter of these cases was subsequently identified as an unleashing of personal passions by Catholic officers opposed to the democratic movement.⁴⁸⁴ The politicisation of the force deepened the concern surrounding their loyalties and reliability. Mayors could no longer count on them in the event of social unrest and looked increasingly toward the Gendarmerie as a neutral quasi-military force to restore order. Nevertheless, reports that the Liberal Mayors of the large cities – Brussels, Antwerp and Liège – sought an audience with the King to express their views that they could no longer maintain order with the tools at their disposal ought not always to be taken at face value. Their increasingly socialist sympathies and wish to upset the Catholic dominance in Parliament often prompted them to express this view in a vain attempt to exert undue pressure upon their political opponents.⁴⁸⁵

Upon their greatest test in August 1914, the Civic Guard reacted with the patriotic fervour expected of a nation under attack. Large numbers of non-active members presented themselves to the authorities to be enlisted in active units. However, there was a reluctance within government to accept their services for anything more than simple police tasks alongside the active Civic Guard, which itself had not been officially mobilised as was required by law.⁴⁸⁶ While this has traditionally been seen as an oversight resulting from the chaos of 4 August 1914, it has been suggested by Pete Veldeman that this was a conscious decision emanating from an 1893 report that questioned the corps' ability to contribute to national defence in the event of invasion.⁴⁸⁷ A circular had been issued to all Provincial Governors on 6 August

⁴⁸⁴ Van Kalken, 'Ce que fut', pp. 550-551.

⁴⁸⁵ *L'Avenir de Luxembourg*, 7 July 1899.

⁴⁸⁶ AEA 030/3-323, Circular from Ministry of the Interior to the Provincial Governors, 11 August 1914.

⁴⁸⁷ P. Veldeman, 'Trapped in a Legal No-Man's Land?' The Extraordinary Case of the Belgian Civic Guard in 1914', in M. De Koster (et.al) (eds.), *Justice in Wartime and*

outlining in strict terms the laws of war by which Civic Guard units should abide. Particular emphasis was placed on the wearing of uniforms with distinctive markings that would clearly distinguish them from *Franc Tireurs*, which would be all the more apparent if an officer or NCOs was present to lead them as a military formation.⁴⁸⁸ Being issued by the Ministry of the Interior, however, it demonstrated the continued civilian nature of the force in legal terms. Although they did engage in some minor actions, which were later used as an excuse for German reprisals, the majority of Civic Guard units adhered to the advice issued by the authorities to perform policing duties until such time as the enemy came into view, after which they were to withdraw.⁴⁸⁹ In any case, they were not prepared for combat as exemplified in the writings of the American war correspondent, Edward Alexander Powell, in which he penned the following amusing account,

The force of citizen soldiery known as the Garde civique has, so far as I am aware, no exact counterpart in any other country. It is composed of business and professional men whose chief duties, prior to the war, had been to show themselves on occasions of ceremony arrayed in gorgeous uniforms. Early in the war the Germans announced that they would not recognize the Garde civique as combatants, and that any of them who were captured while fighting would meet with the same fate as armed civilians. This drastic ruling resulted in many amusing episodes. When it was learned that the Germans were approaching Gent, sixteen hundred civil guardsmen threw their rifles into the

Revolutions: Europe, 1795-1950 (Algemeen Rijksarchief, Brussels, 2012), pp. 361-362.

⁴⁸⁸ AEA 030/3-323, Circular from Ministry of the Interior to the Provincial Governors, 6 August 1914.

⁴⁸⁹ For more on German reprisals against suspected *Franc Tirreur* action see, J. Horne & A. Kramer, *German atrocities, 1914: a history of denial* (Yale University Press, Connecticut & London, 2001), pp. 19-20, 26, 32-33, 44, 65-66, 77 & 89-139.

canal and, stripping off their uniforms, ran about in the pink and light-blue under-garments which the Belgians affect, frantically begging the townspeople to lend them civilian clothing.⁴⁹⁰

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

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

⁴⁹⁰ E.A. Powell, quoted in Veldeman, 'Legal No-Man's Land?', pp. 360-361.

Thus, the Civic Guard ambled through the mid-nineteenth century devoid of the necessary inspiration and impetus to be reconstituted as a useful military force. Equipment was poor, facilities sparse and training often risible. Inculcating a sense of militarism into a social group that had traditionally sought to escape such a charge proved difficult, despite local, state and royal-funded initiatives – such as the *Grand Tir*. An unwillingness amongst the majority of conscripted men capable of supplying their own uniform to spend more to join the more militarised and better equipped *Corps Speciaux* proved difficult enough during times of crisis, let alone during peace, whilst the State could not afford to spend millions of francs re-outfitting the entire force. To look the part was to be the part; but if the former was difficult to achieve in the first place, the latter proved impossible to impose in isolation without running the risk of disaffecting what *La Belgique Militaire* called the ‘armed electoral body.’⁴⁹¹ As such it had to be conceded that improvements in effectiveness were unlikely when ‘the social education is so contrary to its military education; the principles of discipline, abnegation, duty, sacrifice, are very difficult to inculcate in a nation that extensively uses all of its liberties, and above all that of criticising authority in all its forms.’⁴⁹²

Such fears were proved somewhat correct during the social riots of the 1880s and 1900s. Whereas the Civic Guard had provided useful assistance during the *Risquons-Tout* affair in 1848, its subsequent performances when tasked with suppressive actions were less than impressive. Certainly, the lack of adequate training, equipment and leadership were partly to blame, but the fundamental cause of the Civic Guard’s marginalisation by the end of the nineteenth century was the Liberal monopolisation of its ranks following the 1848 Law restricting active units to the major

⁴⁹¹ *Belgique Militaire*, 20 May 1883.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, 8 October 1876.

cities and towns of the country. Whilst the predominantly bourgeois composition was, in theory, the surest safeguard against the rise of socialist unrest, the domination of the Catholic Party in government from 1884 until the outbreak of war saw a realignment of political associations. Common ground on issues such as universal suffrage and anti-clericalism drew closer these unlikely bedfellows. In so doing, the Civic Guard's reliability was questioned even further. Secondary roles when called out as an aid to the civil power were almost inevitable, particularly for *les bleus* whose lack of discipline was an added concern to the authorities. It resulted in the army and Gendarmerie usurping the roles traditionally attributed to the citizen militia – albeit to more bloody effect. The increase in size of the Gendarmerie was testament to the faith shown in its zeal and effectiveness in being the State bulwark against social upheaval by the dawn of the twentieth century. Its apolitical nature, professional composition and structured organisation made it a more appropriate tool for internal policing than the so called 'people's army' who struggled to define itself as an institution and its role within society. It is perhaps not too radical to suggest that *La Belgique Militaire's* conclusion was not too wide of the mark when it proposed that 'If the Civic Guard did not exist, [one] would refrain from inventing it.'⁴⁹³

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 20 October 1872.

Chapter 5 - Fortress Policy and Strategy

Amidst the lengthy debates concerning the organisation and role of the field army between 1830 and 1914, Belgium was also burdened with conflicting concepts of how to integrate the large numbers of forts it had inherited into its military system. The manner in which this was done came to dictate strategic planning, and reflected the extent to which the nation wished to uphold its neutrality through a show of arms. Even preceding the time of Vauban, control of the territory's vital roads and waterways had been militarily essential, leading to a tradition of fortified towns, cities and emplacements that spanned the length and breadth of the 'cockpit of Europe'.⁴⁹⁴ Yet with independence came hope of a reduction in the burden that often accompanied them. As with other aspects of military organisation, local aspirations inhibited the development of sound military planning on a national scale that required the maintenance and expansion of some of these places. The enlargement of Antwerp into an entrenched camp (*camp retranché*), to act as a national redoubt, was delayed by widespread protests from the largely anti-militaristic commercial population, despite the risk of invasion having increased after the events of 1848. Similar objections were raised in the 1880s, and again after the turn of the century, when diplomatic and technological changes forced a redevelopment of the Meuse and Antwerp fortifications respectively. The significant difference this time was the political battle that

⁴⁹⁴ For a general overview of the many fortifications and sieges in present-day Belgium from the fifteenth century until the 1830 Revolution, see H. Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique* Tome III, pp. 79-80; 225-226; 234-239; 280-284; 315-318. For their strategic importance during the War of Spanish Succession, see J. Ostwald, 'The Decisive Battle of Ramillies 1706; Pre-requisites for Decision in Early Modern Warfare', *Journal of Military History*, vol. 64, no. 3, (2000), pp. 649-677.

accompanied the works, which became embroiled in a larger, interwoven issue of finances and military reorganisation.⁴⁹⁵

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

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

⁴⁹⁵ Some aspects of the political-wrangling concerning the construction of fortifications in Belgium have been succinctly outlined in, D. Stevenson, 'Fortifications and the European Balance before 1914', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 35, no. 6 (2012), pp. 845-847.

Britain or Prussia.⁴⁹⁶ Its strongpoints traversed the country in four intersecting lines dominating positions of strategic value. The first of these, running from Oostende, through Nieupoort, Ypres, Menin, Tournai, Gent, and Dendermonde to Antwerp, were designed to offer the British a safe point for continental disembarkation along the Belgian coast. The second series, running from Luxembourg, to Venloo, via Bouillon, Philippeville, Mariembourg, Dinant, Namur, Huy, Liège, and Maastricht, offered protection to Prussia and provided a point of entry along the Meuse and the Sambre where an intervention required there. A third series of forts closed the gap between the Meuse and the Scheldt, with Ath, Mons, and Charleroi designed to cover the movements of an army parallel to the French border. Finally, there was a fourth series of forts covering the ground between the Waal and the tributaries of the Meuse and Rhine, which were intended to protect the Dutch provinces further north.⁴⁹⁷

Whilst certainly offering the expanded Netherlands protection from France, they offered little viable assurance for a newly independent Belgium. Firstly, the sheer cost of maintaining this many structures was beyond the initial capabilities of the state purse, while the ability of the army to provide as many as 60,000 men to cover the garrison that had been provided by the Great Powers before the Revolution, was impractical given the continued state of war against the Dutch until 1839. Herein lay the second issue, for the Netherlands, and not France, was Belgium's primary enemy for the foreseeable future. Indeed, it was with French help that the final Dutch forces had been expelled from these very fortifications, the Antwerp citadel, after a protracted

⁴⁹⁶ J. E Kaufmann & H.W. Kaufmann, *The Forts & Fortifications of Europe 1815 1945. The Neutral States: The Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland* (Pen & Sword Military, Barnsley, 2014), pp. 82-83.

⁴⁹⁷ F. Chazal, *Discours prononcés par M. le Lieutenant Général Baron Chazal, Ministre de la Guerre. Discussion du Projet d'Aggrandissement Général d'Anvers* (Deltombe, Brussels, 1859), pp. 5-6.

siege in 1832.⁴⁹⁸ The redundancy of these fortifications was only further highlighted when Belgium accepted the status of perpetual neutrality. Not only was the Wellington Barrier ineffective against a probable Dutch incursion from the North, but was also no longer acceptable while it was directed solely against France.

As such, at the behest of the Great Powers, five forts were to be dismantled. Initially, King Leopold I offered no objection, seeing this as a cost-effective way of securing peace, prosperity and independence for his Kingdom. However, delays in the ratification of the treaty, and subsequent issues emanating from it, saw a postponement in proceedings until 1839. Thereafter, Belgium refused to comply on account of a large portion of its Limburg province being restored to the Dutch upon the conclusion of the XXIV Articles of the Treaty of London.⁴⁹⁹ Despite seemingly in conflict with its obligations, the Belgian authorities were content to allow the matter to drift. With no immediate threat, the country appeared satisfied to develop its commercial and industrial capacities that had been restricted under Dutch rule. Some retained an interest in the fortifications, but only to the extent of arguing, as they would for decades to come, that their presence would allow for a reduction in the size of the field army.⁵⁰⁰ Clearly, this made little military sense and placed too much faith in the conscientiousness of the guarantor powers. It ostensibly called for the reduction of the army to a mere garrison force, with the nominal support of the absent and ill-equipped Civic Guard in a country whose geographical location offered few assurances.

Notwithstanding attempts to re-organise the army to achieve an establishment of 80,000 men, the realities of the recruitment system saw but a fraction of this figure with the colours at any one time. Training, indefinite leave, and experiments with a

⁴⁹⁸ Wanty, *Milieu*, p. 32.

⁴⁹⁹ de Ryckel, *Historique*, Tome I, pp. 203-206.

⁵⁰⁰ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 3 August 1858.

reserve all contributed to lowering the numbers available for national defence. Of greater influence was the alarmingly high wastage rate of the early years. Deficiencies in the establishment of 28% in 1836 and 1837 were only marginally improved to 23% a decade later.⁵⁰¹ Even at its full complement, the army could not provide enough men to fulfil both roles of garrisoning the remnants of the Wellington Barrier and to provide a suitable supporting force in the field, let alone when having to contend with such organisational faults.

Not until faced with the external threats of revolution in 1848, followed by Louis-Napoleon's coup to dissolve the French National Assembly in 1851, did the question of national defence resurface with any urgency. French invasion seemed likely, while peace with the Netherlands was far from assured in the long-term. If anything, Belgium's numerous defensive works began to be viewed as restrictive and dangerous due to the necessity to disperse the army across the numerous garrisons. This was certainly the opinion of General Chazal, the first advocate of transforming Antwerp into an entrenched camp. In 1859, defending the principle that he had championed for a decade, he stated:

I will repeat, that to be spread out among twenty different points, is to be weak everywhere: by contrast, to be united at a single point, having behind one a good base of operations, a solid fulcrum where all military resources will be concentrated, all the provisions, all the materiel, from where we can break out in force, to bring a compact and well organised mass to bear at the point where its actions will produce the greatest effect, is to be strong everywhere.⁵⁰²

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

⁵⁰² Chazal, *Discours*, pp. 12-13.

Despite the revival of the Civic Guard during the crisis, Belgium's manpower issue certainly indicated this. Deliberations into how Belgium might best resist a direct invasion from a more powerful neighbour swiftly returned a verdict in concert with Chazal's theory, and by 1851 a systematic dismantling of several forts was begun.

On the frontiers and at out-dated points of strategic value, as well as around the smaller towns of Ypres, Menin, Ath, Boullion, Philippeville, and Mariembourg, fortifications were demolished. Although it proved more costly than originally anticipated, requiring an extra 3,500,600 francs to complete the process in 1853, the expense was justified by the government on two counts. Firstly, that the substantial long-term costs of maintenance, arming, and garrisoning would be definitively removed from the public purse. It was calculated that some 12,398 men might be released from garrison duty alone.⁵⁰³ Secondly, that, once started, the fortifications had to be demolished in their entirety in order to remove from an invading force the opportunity to easily capture and hold the remaining defences.⁵⁰⁴ As a move towards a more co-ordinated and sound scheme for national defence, the dismantling of these places was an appropriate measure that brought the army and its fortresses into closer alignment. Nevertheless, on a local level, it surprisingly engendered resentment among councillors and residents who felt that communal interests were being ignored.

On the one hand, representatives from Philippeville raised concerns that the removal of its defences, and as a result its garrison, would see the local economy suffer irreparably. In a speech on 4 March 1853, Georges de Baillet-Latour, Liberal representative for Philippeville, suggested that the city, whose population of just 1,400 possessed no other commercial or industrial outlet, was entitled to financial

⁵⁰³ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 3 August 1858.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 3 June 1853.

compensation from the government. It was argued that in every other case of expropriation for public needs, proprietors would be reimbursed and that, despite this case being inverted, it was no different.⁵⁰⁵ Ypres' representatives and the local press were similarly concerned, and despite being allocated two cavalry regiments for the foreseeable future, were unsure as to whether this would fill the economic void.⁵⁰⁶ There had also been talk of moving the *École d'Enfants de Troupe* there too, but only on condition that the city would provide a building for it and provide the finance for its maintenance, calculated at a less than appealing 50,000 francs.⁵⁰⁷

Above all, what towns such as Philippeville and Ypres wanted were the grounds upon which the fortifications stood to be returned to them free of charge. The costs of having provided barracks and training spaces for decades seemed to entitle them to these concessions, although the government was unwilling to acquiesce for fear of setting a costly precedent.⁵⁰⁸ In some instances, it was even desirable for the city to retain some of the works, such as the moat around Ypres, which it was hoped might provide the inhabitants with a source of nearby water, or the gates around cities that preserved commercial taxes for goods entering the city. Such demands were in keeping with the tradition of upholding local interests through the system of devolved power that ignored the interests of the wider nation. A rather exasperated Minister of Foreign Affairs summed up, 'when we build fortifications, the towns complain; when we demolish fortifications, the towns complain; the towns always complain when they hope to obtain concessions from the treasury.'⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., 4 March 1853.

⁵⁰⁶ *Le Progrès*, 14 April 1853; and *Le Propagateur*, 15 June 1853.

⁵⁰⁷ *Le Propagateur*, 12 November 1853; and Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 21 December 1853.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 3 June, 1853; and 7 December 1853.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 7 December 1853.

Conversely, although reaffirming the demanding nature of local interests that frustrated ministers, Namur pleaded to have its fortifications entirely demolished in 1856 on account of the stifling effect they were having on industry. Yet ironically, Namur, along with other stronger installations of the Wellington Barrier had not been designated for decommission. The new railway link to Luxembourg had increased the volume of freight entering the city, and was likely to see further lines connected in the future. However, as the primary consideration in the development of the Belgian railways was to integrate them into an international system of trade, little consideration was given to their effect on national defence.⁵¹⁰ Instead of providing an argument against further construction of the network, it was used as a reason for dismantling existing fortifications. François Moncheur, the Catholic representative from Namur, told the Chamber that these lines had actually reduced the defences of the position due to their traversing the approaches, and that the city might be freed from the constraints of its walls as a result. Expansion onto, and beyond, the 35 hectares of land occupied by the fortifications was not only desirable for Namur's inhabitants, but it was argued that the money raised through its sale could be used to redevelop the citadel or be put to use at another strategically important location in the country.⁵¹¹

In fact, Namur, in conjunction with Liège, held a strategically important point on the Meuse that was recognised in the discussions concerning the role of Antwerp, the army and national defence. The six committees that sat between 1847 and 1856, which received input from 18 generals, 10 other senior officers from across all arms, and 15 civilians from both the Chamber of Representatives and the Senate, concluded

⁵¹⁰ For more on the development of Belgian railways see, M. Laffut, 'Belgium', in P. O'Brien (ed.), *Railways and the Economic Development of Western Europe, 1830-1914* (MacMillan Press, Basingstoke, 1983), pp. 203-226.

⁵¹¹ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 16 January 1856.

that the Meuse valley had to remain fortified to support the emerging strategic system of concentration around the new national redoubt of Antwerp.⁵¹²

The conversion of Antwerp into an impregnable bastion upon which to concentrate the forces of the nation was first conceived by General Félix Chazal in 1847. It built on previous ideas that, in the event of invasion, the Royal Family, government and army might fall back on the geographically-suited commercial centre to await succour from Belgium's guarantors.⁵¹³ Located at the extremities of the country behind the few natural defensive obstacles available, with accessible routes for resupply, Antwerp was a more logical choice as a final stronghold than Brussels. The Scheldt estuary to the north, which could be inundated by the defenders, would force an assailant between Herenthals and St Bernard. If attacked from the south, a force of 60,000 would be able to hold out long enough to welcome British relief via the Scheldt, or through Flanders should the attack come from the north. Even if faced with the unthinkable situation of a British invasion of Belgium, Lt.-Col. De Lannoy, Inspector General of Fortifications, was confident of repelling a landing that would permit operations in the enemy's preferred theatre.⁵¹⁴

Adhering to the policy of unifying force, Antwerp, with a few additions such as a ring of outlying forts to protect its walls, along with bridgeheads at Mechelen and Aerschot, was to provide the perfect point for the army to concentrate in safety. Given the uncertainty over what form an invasion might take, or where it would come from,

⁵¹² MRA Fonds Fortifications: Antwerp 73/3-10, Report in the name of the Section Centrale by Mr Goblet, 17 May 1856; and H-A. Brialmont, *Réponse au pamphlet Anvers et M. Brialmont* (Guyot, Brussels, 1865), p. 21.

⁵¹³ Ibid., Antwerp 73/3-7 Note on the question of the enlargement of Antwerp and on the provisions that might be made to satisfy current requirements. 1855; and Brialmont, *Réponse*, p. 13.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., Note on the military importance of Antwerp and the work it requires, 19 May 1852.

it was difficult to set down a precise strategic plan to cover all eventualities, but it was fairly evident from the studies undertaken that Antwerp would play a central role.⁵¹⁵ To be used as a base of operations, the army would theoretically be able to operate at great distances from the city itself, with pivots at the retained defences on the Meuse, and across the country. In true Jominian style, the army would benefit from secure lines of operations to engage at the decisive point. In fact, it reflected Jomini's own analysis of Austria's failed defence of Belgium in 1792. By establishing a defensive cordon along the frontiers they had left themselves weak at all points, when they should have 'placed themselves well back, ready to exploit the unity of their base of operations to meet separately the converging thrusts of the attackers.'⁵¹⁶ Although the revered theorist had considered Brussels suitable for this role, Antwerp provided similar, if not greater, benefits. It solved the issue concerning the size of the army, and promised it an active role in the defence of the nation that satisfied desires to uphold neutrality through a show of arms. While many applauded such a stance, some remained unconvinced of the method.

For the sceptics, it proved difficult to convince them that the country at large, and Brussels in particular, were not simply being abandoned for the benefit of the commercial centre alone. In the Chamber of Representatives, Barthélemy Dumortier, Catholic representative for Roulers, took the opportunity in 1858 to argue that Brussels 'is the heart of the country, it is there that we must plant the flag of patriotism high and strong, it is there that we must call on the entire population to the defence of our

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., Antwerp 73/3-10, Report in the name of the Section Centrale by Mr Goblet, 17 May 1856.

⁵¹⁶ Strachan, *European Armies*, p. 62. For an overview of Jominian principles, see Strachan, *European Armies*, pp. 60-75; and J. Shy, 'Jomini' in P. Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986), pp. 143-185.

territory, of our independence'.⁵¹⁷ Serviced by six railway lines connecting to outlying cities, Brussels, it was argued, was much better equipped to be the nation's focal point than Antwerp, which only possessed a single operational line that was likely to become overloaded with men, materiel and the transfer of public services during an invasion. Additionally, Antwerp's greatest weakness was the requirement to hold both shores of the Scheldt in order to secure its resupply; a less than certain situation if the Netherlands were the enemy, and a problem with which Brussels did not have to contend. Dumortier continued to disregard the chosen policy by passionately observing, '[t]he entire country, abandoned; strangers arriving to trample the sacred soil of our territory. They will come and crush us and suck the blood and money from the country in order to go and fight our brothers in this camp at Antwerp. My heart is revolted by this parasitic idea.'⁵¹⁸ This was both overly pessimistic and misguided in equal measure. The army was expected to meet an invading force in the field, delaying the advance long enough for a relieving guarantor force to arrive. Only in dire circumstances was the army to withdraw behind the walls of Antwerp, and even this was similarly until assistance was obtained.

It was one thing trying to convince sceptical politicians that the military strategists had settled on the correct, and most cost-effective option, but it was another entirely to persuade the public. On two counts, namely its commercial activities and the cumbersome military servitudes imposed on proprietors in the vicinity of fortifications, the local population raised vehement protests against the government's plans. Since 1585, when the Dutch barred merchant vessels from entering the Scheldt in order to create a commercial monopoly at Amsterdam, Antwerp's inhabitants had fought to

⁵¹⁷ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 3 August 1858.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

regain their just position at the heart of European trade. The reopening of the Scheldt by the French in 1795 slowly changed the city's fortunes to the point where, by 1815, prosperity had returned. With this, however, came a significant growth in population, which continued to overwhelm the old defences with ever-expanding suburbs 'choking up' the existing fortifications whose approaches were no longer clear for military use. Reporting on the development of the defensive works, two British officers accurately noted the conflicting state of affairs,

Already the city is too small for the wants of the commercial population, and in the course of another twenty years the disproportion will become unbearable. In considering therefore the future prospects of Antwerp as a fortress it must be borne in mind that the present line of defences cannot long be maintained.⁵¹⁹

Clearly the desires of the population did not complement the military requirements. This problem persisted for the remainder of the century. The shackles of limited trade were completely removed from the port in 1863 after the Belgians bought out their neighbours' right to levy tolls on shipping entering the Scheldt estuary, whose mouth had returned to Dutch hands in 1839. From this point on, the commercial metropolis continued to expand exponentially.⁵²⁰

Proposals to enlarge the city by demolishing the old walls and reconstructing a larger enceinte, that would encompass the wider agglomeration of suburbs spreading to the north and east, was just one of many propositions to resolve the issue. Yet any new

⁵¹⁹ MRA Fonds Fortifications: Antwerp 73/3-12, Report upon the entrenched camp lately formed round Antwerp by Captain W.M. Dixon Royal Artillery & Captain R.M. Laffan Royal Engineers. May 1854.

⁵²⁰ H. Greefs, 'De Schelde geblokkerd in 1839: hoe Antwerpen opinieuw een provinciestad werd', in M. Van Ginderachter et.al (eds.), *Het Land dat Nooit Was: Één Tegen-Freitelijk Geschiedenis van België* (De Bezig Bij Antwerpen, Antwerp, 2014), p. 77.

fortified line would almost certainly impose further military servitudes on dwellers within the military zone, whose properties were subject to demolition without the right to compensation in order to facilitate military operations.⁵²¹ This devalued properties and imposed a significant burden on a large swathe of the population who had emigrated to the grounds outside the walls out of necessity since 1830.⁵²² This had been permitted, wrongly in the eyes of many, as a result of the confidence placed in the Treaty of London, which had seemingly rendered fortifications and the laws governing military servitudes superfluous. Those representing the affected communities naturally did not share this opinion, and campaigned strongly against what they considered to be archaic and unjust obligations unwittingly imposed on the unsuspecting.⁵²³ In a further demonstration of local power, violent meetings and petitions by the anti-militaristic population in 1862 saw them eventually win a minor victory against the servitudes imposed by the northern citadel. Their actions culminated in the final dismantling of the fortification in 1881, which had long been described as dangerous, inviting bombardment to a densely populated area within the old city walls.⁵²⁴ However, requests for general exemption were rejected on the grounds of setting a precedent that would need to be extended across the nation's other strongpoints.

The transformation of Antwerp into an entrenched camp, in whatever form this took, brought such matters into sharp focus, influencing the military plans and public reaction to them. In general terms there were three proposals made during the 1850s that attempted to satisfy all parties and the essential question of national defence. The

⁵²¹ The law of 1791 and the Royal Decree of 1815 were still in force during the 1850s.

⁵²² MRA Fonds Fortifications: Antwerp 73/3–12, Note on the question of the enlargement of Antwerp and on the provisions that might be made to satisfy current requirements, 1855.

⁵²³ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 7 December 1852; and 7 December 1853.

⁵²⁴ *La Belgique Militaire*, 27 March 1887, p. 402.

first was a rather modest, government-endorsed, expansion to the north of the city alone; the second a medium enlargement of the walls, and finally a general expansion with a large enceinte encompassing a series of outlying forts designed to place the city out of range of enemy bombardment. The former was rejected by the commission of experts in August 1858 after it was shown to not provide enough long-term commercial benefits, servitude reprieves, or military assurances. Indeed, it was pointed out that the increasing population would rapidly demand additional developments that would prove more costly than if the decision were undertaken to build larger fortifications from the outset.⁵²⁵ Ideas for a larger enceinte by both De Lannoy and the civilian architects Keller & Co were similarly discarded on account of the inconvenience it would cause to the suburbs of Borgerhout and Berchem through which the fortifications would run.⁵²⁶ This made the concept of general enlargement the preferred option as, despite its initial cost of 45,000,000 francs, it best satisfied the commercial and military requirements through its size and defensive capabilities.⁵²⁷

While De Lannoy's influence in the development of ideas transforming Antwerp into a national redoubt ought not to be underestimated, the credit for its development into one of Europe's foremost strongholds undoubtedly lay with Belgium's pre-eminent military engineer, Henri-Alexis Brialmont.⁵²⁸ In 1859, he drew

⁵²⁵ MRA Fond Fortifications: Anvers 73/3-7, Report: Project of the enlargement of Antwerp by De Lannoy, 26 September 1856; Chazal, *Discours*, pp. 21-22; and Brialmont, *Réponse*, p. 12.

⁵²⁶ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 3 August 1858; and Chazal, *Discours*, p. 32.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid*, 3 August 1858.

⁵²⁸ Col. De Lannoy, 'Le Roi Léopold 1er et la Défense Nationale: l'organisation de l'armée et la question des fortifications d'Anvers', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 24, no.1 (1981), pp. 145-147. Henri Alexis Brialmont (25 May 1821 – 21 July 1903). Graduated from the *École Militaire* in 1843, private secretary to Minister of War, Félix Chazal 1847-1850. Promoted to Lieutenant-General in 1877 and was Inspector General of the Army until his retirement in 1892.

up plans that advocated the removal of the old city walls and for the construction of eight polygonal forts, whose design had been inspired from observations made while touring Prussia. Upon their completion in 1864, many foreign observers deemed them, and the fortress as a whole, as among the best examples of its design.⁵²⁹ Spaced between one and two kilometres apart at a distance of approximately four kilometres from the city proper, these forts provided ample space in which a defensive force could manoeuvre. This was of vital importance in the defence of the city as there were no defensive works of note in these intervals. Despite recriminations, Brialmont believed that this was necessary in order to maintain the concentration of forces at the vital points.⁵³⁰ Infantry and mobile artillery were to be as much a part of the defensive structure as the fitted guns in the fortifications. Having an allocated force upwards of 40,000 men for this task, it was clear that the 1859 commission, which settled on this proposal, was committed to the idea of a concentration of forces that would see the modest field army operate within a safe distance of its supporting bodies at Antwerp. The bridgeheads on the Meuse were to provide delaying actions, certainly, but independence was to be retained under Antwerp's new defensive installations that could provide cover long enough to welcome a relieving force.

Not long had Belgium's defensive jewel been completed - to the acclaim of Europe - than advances in rifled artillery outpaced the effectiveness of its design. The devastating firepower of Prussian artillery during the siege of Paris in 1870-71 against fortifications built within the last 30 years was cause enough for concern. High calibre guns obliterated the capital's outer forts with consummate ease in a matter of hours. But perhaps even more worrying was the distance from which these pieces could now

⁵²⁹ Brialmont, *Réponse*, pp. 23-24.

⁵³⁰ C. Faque, *Henri-Alexis Brialmont: Les Forts de la Meuse 1887-1891* (Les Amis de la Citadelle de Namur, Namur, 1988), pp. 16 & 29.

be deployed, firing shells beyond what had been considered the safe zone and into the city itself.⁵³¹ Both developments brought the utility of Brialmont's Antwerp fortifications into serious doubt. Questions concerning the population's safety were interspersed with discussions of a strategic nature that examined whether the national redoubt still afforded the army enough protection to concentrate, and from which to operate in the event of an invasion.

After so much deliberation, expense and reorganisation, Antwerp had to remain the crux of Belgium's military strategy, which itself remained wedded to the idea of minimizing the dispersal of forces across its territory. To do otherwise was to undermine the faith placed in the 1859 commission that had so painstakingly singled out a handful of outlying strongpoints that might serve the army as bridgeheads or pivots of manoeuvre in the event of an invasion. Indeed, further reductions by Charles Rogier's Liberal Government in 1861 had seen the works at Charleroi and the citadel at Gent demolished in a bid to further concentrate forces. Even after the Franco-Prussian War, the Catholic Government under Barthélemy de Theux de Meylandt decided to take this even further by decommissioning the fort at Oostende and the citadel at Tournai in 1873.⁵³² Unsurprisingly, Antwerp itself required major revisions befitting its continued role at the heart of national defence. These took the form of modifications to existing works and new constructions at a distance of between eight and 15 kilometres from the city centre. Dendermonde, Walem, Lier, Steendorp and

⁵³¹ G. Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003), pp. 281-284; and R. Tombs, 'The Wars against Paris', in S. Förster & J. Nagler (eds.), *On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861-1871* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997), pp. 541-545.

⁵³² *Belgique Militaire*, 27 March 1887, p. 414.

Schoten underwent work between 1878 and 1885, while four redoubts and a series of smaller positions were added between 1883 and 1893.

Notwithstanding these additions that went some way to restoring Antwerp's defensive capabilities, the momentous change in the geo-political situation of Europe following the newly unified German Empire's acquisition of Alsace-Lorraine, significantly altered the type of invasion likely to confront Belgium. The 1859 commissions' idea of a direct invasion seeking to conquer had become improbable as the juggernauts of France and Germany sought to attack one another via Belgium's lightly defended Meuse valley. It was conceivable that a transitory invasion through the south-eastern corner of the country might not even force either belligerent to bother about the Belgian army or the state of the defences at its national redoubt. This resulted in an immediate shift of focus away from Antwerp and towards the outlying posts at Liège and Namur.

With France's loss of Alsace-Lorraine, the prospects of a lasting peace in Europe appeared increasingly unlikely. The result, for Belgium, was the further likelihood of somehow being dragged into a Franco-German conflict in the future, which it had so narrowly avoided in 1870-71. Exponents of a lightly armed neutrality had hailed this fact as confirmation that international law would continue to guarantee Belgium's independence, which in turn would allow the government to return to its primary function of developing social and commercial prosperity rather than wasting time on costly military reorganisation. However, France's decision to not fortify its border with Belgium was, as David Stevenson notes 'striking as to raise the possibility that it was deliberate', almost encouraging future German aggression across Belgian,

as opposed to French, soil.⁵³³ The Meuse corridor offered the route of least resistance for attacks aimed at the Rhineland or Paris, especially given the relative lack of attention given to its fortifications while Antwerp was under construction. The citadels of Liège and Namur offered cursory protection to the cities' inhabitants, who came to see them as targets that would invite bombardment, while the fort of La Chartreuse and the strategically important points of Visé and Huy were far from satisfactorily equipped.

It became very obvious that the Meuse would therefore play a substantial role in the event of a future war, and many high-ranking Belgian officers saw it as an obligation to strengthen its defences. Successive Ministers of War, for example, were very vocal on this point and attempted to highlight the strategic importance of the area. General Bruno Renard, Minister of War from 1868-1870 and again from 1878-1879, noted that, 'The Meuse will play a great role if a war takes place in our territory; whether we have to defend ourselves alone against an invasion, or whether the belligerent powers choose our country as their battlefield, the Meuse, I repeat, will exercise a great influence on operations and will prove a great aid to the one who controls it.'⁵³⁴ General Henri Guillaume, Minister of War from 1870-1873, similarly expressed concerns that Alsace-Lorraine might provide a launch pad for a future invasion, with the key to its success, the mastery of the river Meuse.⁵³⁵ Finally, General Jean-Baptiste Liagre, Minister of War from 1879-1880, emphasised in a speech on 9 April 1880 that,

⁵³³ Stevenson, 'Fortifications', p. 845.

⁵³⁴ H.A. Brialmont, *Situation Militaire de la Belgique: Travaux de défense de la Meuse* (C. Muquardt, Brussels, 1882), p. 195.

⁵³⁵ *Le Meuse*, 19 April 1880.

The Meuse valley [...] has become the line of operation for belligerent armies in the event of a war between Germany and France. Should Germany attack France, it would behove them to cross the Meuse at Liège or Namur in order to invade France from the north. Reciprocally, should France attack Germany, it would be of great strategic interest to cross the Meuse at either point, in its search to penetrate into Germany via the lower Rhine.⁵³⁶

Yet, despite this public airing of concern, it took over a decade before the first draft plans for a redevelopment of the Meuse fortifications were commissioned by the Liberal Ministry of Walthère Frère-Orban in 1882.

Preliminary planning was entrusted to Brialmont, who had also been outspoken in his support of fortifying the Meuse. Through his numerous publications, newspaper articles and public speeches, the ageing military engineer spearheaded the army's campaign to intertwine the seemingly obvious necessity to improve the nation's physical defences with the unpopular measure of introducing personal service. In one such publication, Brialmont wrote,

In order for Germany to not have a great incentive to violate Belgian neutrality, we would need to be able to oppose an invading army with a resistance that would oblige it to slow its march and to make a considerable detachment in order to secure its line of operations. This result can be obtained if, after having furnished our fortresses with good troops, we are still able to put into the field a well organised army of 70,000 men, and if the positions of Liège and Namur, which the invaders will need in order to make the Meuse valley a line of supply and evacuation, are only able to be taken by a regular siege. In this situation, the German army would have to fight, independently of

⁵³⁶ Brialmont, *Situation Militaire*, p. 195.

our active forces, the French corps which, at the very moment of the invasion of Belgium, will have moved towards Namur via Givet and Maubeuge, as well as having to mask Antwerp to protect its lines of operation, we can be sure that Belgian neutrality will be respected.⁵³⁷

Naturally, similar principles applied to a French invasion. However, the political climate facing the Meuse proposals of the 1880s was very different from that during the 1850s debates over Antwerp. Military policy had become a voting issue of the highest, and most contentious, order, and neither Liberals nor Catholics could lightly commit to such costly measures without risking political capital.

Even as early as 1880, before any formal examinations had been made concerning the fortification of the Meuse, partisan reporting was moulding public opinion. The clerical press, in particular, was accused of spreading rumours that construction of 22 forts had been sanctioned by the Liberal Government that would, in effect, turn Liège and Namur into entrenched camps like Antwerp.⁵³⁸ This was, of course, a complete fabrication, but it did allow them to draw focus away from the troublesome school laws and onto the Liberals' apparent thirst for military expenditure, which in the run up to the elections was likely to turn voters towards Catholic frugality. Local interests were also at stake, with Julien Warnant, for example, questioning why more bridges could not be built to facilitate the local economy, even though they were supposedly under the guns of the Liège citadel and La Chartreuse. The response from Liagre was that there were already a dozen undefended bridges that compromised the defence of the river, but that the matter would be looked at in due course. While this promised to satisfy nobody, it remained important to display a façade that transcended

⁵³⁷ Ibid., p. 185.

⁵³⁸ *La Meuse*, 21 May 1880.

local interests, despite feelings to the contrary. It was of course ‘these sorts of sacrifices that are not challenged when we wish to merit the title of being a nation’.⁵³⁹

In fact, there were many inhabitants of Liège and Namur who welcomed the idea of new fortifications, particularly those of a similar nature to Antwerp that would place the city out of artillery range. The old citadel of Liège and La Chartreuse, in particular, almost invited shelling of built-up areas in order to secure the river crossing. Distanced forts would have the added benefit of allowing the decommissioning of the existing defences and reduction in the military servitudes imposed on those living within the immediate surrounds.⁵⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the Frère-Orban Cabinet did not feel comfortable committing to such a costly and divisive endeavour, and it took a further five years and a change of government in order to bring about the necessary alterations.

When the Catholic Ministry under Auguste Beernaert took the decision to invite Brialmont to undertake a further study of the Meuse fortifications on 31 December 1886, it was in the hope of presenting something to the Chamber before the recess. The King was particularly anxious to see the plans drawn up and the process to begin as quickly as possible due to his shared ambitions with high-ranking officers to see Belgium’s military capacity increased.⁵⁴¹ Having already studied the question in 1882 and been consistently at the forefront of the wealth of publications dealing with Belgian strategy and military affairs, Brialmont was able to produce a report by 15 January 1887, which was duly presented to the nation. It followed similar principles to those employed at Antwerp, namely two rings of independent forts at a distance of between

⁵³⁹ Plenum.be, Chamber of Representatives Debates, 9 April 1880; and *La Meuse*, 12 April 1880.

⁵⁴⁰ *Belgique Militaire*, 19 September 1886, p. 361.

⁵⁴¹ G. Schallich, ‘Quelques chiffres concernant le coût des forts ‘Brialmont’ de Liège et de Namur’, *Bulletin d’Information du Centre Liégeois d’Histoire et d’Archeologie Militaires*, vol. 3, no. 3, (1986), p. 35.

seven and nine kilometres from the city centres of Liège and Namur that would form the nucleus of these systems. The former was to receive twelve forts at intervals of approximately five kilometres (six large and six smaller *fortins*), while the latter was initially to receive seven forts and the retention of its citadel. However, by 1 February, it was decided to abandon the citadel and construct four large and five small forts, identical to those at Liège.⁵⁴²

The construction of these forts was projected to cost approximately 24,000,000 francs, although the ‘torpedo shell crisis’ required a change of design and augmented expenditure by a further 30,000,000 francs. Interpretation of French artillery tests at Malmaison in the summer of 1886 had shown that delayed-action fuses in steel shells, carrying melinite explosive could demolish standard masonry within hours.⁵⁴³ To counter this, each fort was to be built using revolutionary methods that saw concrete poured into a single-cased mould, 2.5 metres thick. An additional three metres of earth-works were to cover these structures in order to withstand the heaviest siege artillery of the day, namely 210mm and 220mm guns. However, difficulties with the capabilities of machinery and adequate illumination forced construction to be suspended at night. This meant that the unreinforced concrete could not be poured continuously, resulting in inadequately-bound layers that weakened the overall structure. The Germans, who used the Meuse forts as a basis for the construction at Molsheim in 1890, and the French, who were to use the same methods a few years later, overcame these difficulties with far greater success.⁵⁴⁴ Although not an issue for the Meuse forts at the time of

⁵⁴² Ibid., p. 36; *La Meuse*, 14 and 28 February 1887; and *l'Indépendance Belge*, 18 February 1887.

⁵⁴³ Stevenson, ‘Fortifications’, p. 831; and Schallich, ‘Quelques chiffres’, p. 36.

⁵⁴⁴ For a detailed description of the technical aspects of the Meuse forts and their construction, see Faque, *Henri-Alexis Brialmont*, pp. 33-40; and Kauffman & Kauffman, *Forts and Fortifications*, pp. 85-90.

completion in 1891, these weaknesses were to be exposed in the opening weeks of the First World War by 305mm and 420mm howitzers. These guns were able to generate a force of more than 3,600 metric tons worth of energy upon impact, while the fortifications were built to withstand just 240 metric tons of energy dissipated by an 1887 210mm shell.⁵⁴⁵

In their armaments, too, the Meuse forts appeared to answer the requirements of the day. Between them, they housed 171 cupolas with a variety of medium and heavy guns. These had been fitted at a further expense of 24,210,775 francs (3,000,000 of this for their tests, transportation, and installation). These could have been obtained at a lower cost, as the German firm Gruson (later taken over by Krupp) had quoted the Belgians a price of 17,409,378 if granted exclusivity. However, pressure from rival French firms, and particularly Belgian industry, compelled the government to split the contract between the three nations, despite the additional costs, on the condition that both German and French factories associated themselves with their Belgian counterparts, providing them with the technology and expertise that they lacked.⁵⁴⁶ This was a decision taken to appease the competing firms but also to support Belgium's own arms industry, largely based around Liège, which had for a long time provided the army with small arms, ammunition and a few artillery pieces, but had been unable to expand on account of technical and financial limitations.⁵⁴⁷

⁵⁴⁵ De Vos, *Première Guerre*, p. 30.

⁵⁴⁶ Schallich, 'Quelques chiffres', p. 38.

⁵⁴⁷ For more on Belgium's arms industry see, P. Leonard, 'Le Manufacture d'Armes de l'État (M.A.E.)', *Bulletin d'Information du Centre Liégeois d'Histoire et d'Archeologie Militaires*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1986), pp. 5-24; and J. Herlant, 'De Fonderie Royale de Canons, industrielle pijler voorde uitrusting van de Belgische Defensie tussen 1830 en 1870. Historische en technologische analyse', *Cahiers belges d'histoire militaire*, vol. 3 (2005), pp. 99-197.

For all intents and purposes, the 71,600,000 francs spent on the Meuse fortresses between 1887 and 1891 seemed to have created the strong defensive barrier being called for. It had appeared to offer this guarantee when it was first announced in 1887. Yet, no sooner had the Beernaert Ministry taken the decision to push ahead with the Liège fortifications, than seemingly the Liberal opposition changed tack and rallied support from local inhabitants against proposals, which they had previously championed. The political face of Belgium's fortress policy had blatantly reared its ugly head once more. Frère-Orban took the opportunity to attack the government's policy by suggesting that it had been forced on the nation through its late introduction to the Chamber, and that Beernaert had performed an incredible *volte-face* given his well-documented comments under the Jules Malou Government that there would be no more military charges. 'He has misled the country and exploited, before the voters, the question of national defence', was the accusation levelled at Beernaert by his political opponent; one that in the context of Catholic policy throughout the mid-nineteenth century was not too much of an exaggeration.⁵⁴⁸

Frère-Orban's assault continued with vehement protestations against the fortifications themselves, terming them 'useless, ineffectual, and dangerous'. They were useless because an invading army could cross the Meuse at Maastricht or Maeseyck and advance either via Hasselt or Landen, or even by Aix-la-Chapelle towards the lower Rhine to get to France. In other words, they could be turned. They were deemed ineffectual because there were not enough troops to defend them properly, allowing the enemy to take them easily. Finally, they were seen as dangerous because a ring of twelve forts, in the case of Liège, with the city at its centre, constituted a

⁵⁴⁸ *l'Indépendance Belge*, 19 February 1887.

retrenched camp that would draw an invading army towards it.⁵⁴⁹ The Liberal press was quick to seize upon this theme and wrote such things as, ‘Liège is about to share with Antwerp the honour and the danger in serving as the rampart of Belgian nationality’, all the while demonstrating its geographically exposed nature that placed it well within range of a German *coup de main*.⁵⁵⁰ *La Gazette de Liège* published a series of 14 articles personally criticizing Brialmont, in which they wrongly accused him of transforming Namur and Liège into entrenched camps that would invite attack.⁵⁵¹ As will be demonstrated below, this was not at all the case. The Meuse fortifications were merely to act as bridgeheads and pivots for the field army, but such a rationale became worryingly absent from the Liberal onslaught. Brialmont felt obliged to respond on numerous occasions to defend his position, concluding in one instance that, ‘The future will avenge these reckless accusations; it will show on which side political prudence and military sense actually were.’⁵⁵²

Of course, this might also be seen as an extraordinary contradiction on the part of Frère-Orban, given his personal involvement in asking Brialmont to draw up preliminary plans in 1882. However, the Liberal leader cared little and was not about to spurn an opportunity to sow seeds of division among the Catholic ranks. Indeed, Beernaert faced a wall of opposition from within his own party, that balked at the idea of committing to further military expenditure of this magnitude. The Church, the clerical press, and the Catholic associations all rallied around the phrase ‘not one man, not one penny more’. The Premier attempted to mollify them with promises that the fortifications would act as a shield against the introduction of personal service, all the

⁵⁴⁹ *Belgique Militaire*, 27 March 1887, p. 402; 22 May 1887, p. 659; and *La Meuse*, 13 March 1888.

⁵⁵⁰ *La Meuse*, 10 February 1887.

⁵⁵¹ *Belgique Militaire*, 13 March 1887, pp. 340-343; and 27 March 1887, pp. 402-410

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, 8 May 1887, p. 612.

while seemingly unaware that the new defences would require an increase in the establishment to make them effective.⁵⁵³ Eventually, enough cross-party support was obtained in this ‘national question of the first order’ to see the Bill passed through the Chamber of Representatives by a majority of 40 votes in June 1887 despite Frère-Orban’s attempt to turn it into a political issue. The Senate followed suit later that month with 42 votes in favour, nine against and nine abstentions.

Strategically, it changed little, in spite of accusations to the contrary. The 1859 plan of the concentration of forces had always envisaged the use of the Meuse as a pivot upon which the field army might operate, and the new fortifications at Liège and Namur merely reinforced this possibility. Brialmont remained adamant that these points remained nothing more than bridgeheads that would allow the army to control both banks of the river, allowing it to operate on the ground of its choosing.⁵⁵⁴ As Jomini had once said, ‘‘whoever is master of the Meuse is the master of Belgium.’’⁵⁵⁵ Certainly there was a greater emphasis on delaying an advancing army along this corridor than had previously been envisioned, but Antwerp had not lost its importance. The principle of concentrating forces was retained, and the possibility of the army retreating to the national redoubt after having delayed an invading force in its transitory move across southern Belgium similarly endured.

While it remained a primary concern that such a retreat would be occasioned prematurely due to a lack of men, it was argued that the reduction in garrisons from the decommissioned forts since 1859 had partly made up for the increased force needed to hold the Meuse without interfering with the strength of the field army. Indeed, this had

⁵⁵³ *La Meuse*, 24 February 1887.

⁵⁵⁴ *Belgique Militaire*, 13 March 1887, pp. 341-343; 27 March 1887, pp. 409-410, & 420.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 19 September 1886, p. 360.

released some 12,419 men and 584 guns to the field army that had previously not been taken into account. When the 8,800 men of the old Meuse garrison were added to this figure, it was shown that a force of approximately 21,200 men was available to hold the new forts, without altering the size of the army prescribed by the 1859 commission. Of course, the modifications to Antwerp since its completion in 1864 necessitated a further 5,000 men to be added to its garrison, but this was more than compensated for by the increase in the annual contingent from 10,000 to 13,300.⁵⁵⁶ As an article in *La Belgique Militaire* concluded, this was ‘not the abandonment of the system of concentration, but indeed the reinforcement of this system, not the dissemination of active forces, but rather a better use of these forces.’⁵⁵⁷ This was only partly true. As Brialmont, other senior figures, and foreign observers continued to note, Belgium still lacked a force strong enough to act as an effective deterrent to the conscript armies likely to face it. Only the introduction of personal service in its own forces would truly allow it to meaningfully carry out its strategic plans. Yet it was not until the European crises at the start of the twentieth century that changes to this end were undertaken.

The First Moroccan Crisis of 1905 reawakened Europe to the possibility of a future conflict between its main powers. For Belgium, it inspired a move to examine the state of its armed forces and fortifications, which had once again been relegated to a secondary importance behind the social issues of the day, universal male suffrage and electoral reform. A succession of Catholic governments, since 1884, had pursued a largely frugal policy towards the army, and reduced its effective strength to a bare minimum through a failed scheme of voluntary enlistment since 1902.⁵⁵⁸ Repeated

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 27 March 1887, p. 415.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 422.

⁵⁵⁸ For more detail on this, see Chapter 2.

efforts to introduce conscription had been rejected out of hand by the anti-militaristic majority, while the army's equipment (especially the artillery) and fortresses had once again fallen into obsolescence. Military budgets across Europe were being stretched as nations attempted to keep pace with one another through the development of their navies and the introduction of quick-firing field guns. Although Belgium did not partake in the former, reluctant spending on artillery was eventually undertaken, leaving little desire to update its fortifications despite the siege of Port Arthur in 1904 demonstrating that these structures might still play a valuable role in modern warfare.⁵⁵⁹ Upon inspection, Antwerp's dated fortifications appeared lacking, and unlikely to fulfil the role a future war might ask it to play. As such, what little money could be induced out of the majority Catholic Chamber of Representatives was put to use on the national redoubt, despite such measures proving of limited use without sufficient numbers in the field army to support it.

Notwithstanding continued opposition from the traditional Catholic anti-militaristic milieus, the second Ministry of Paul de Smet de Naeyer, undertook what they believed to be a national obligation to expand the Antwerp fortifications in 1906. The initial government project envisioned the construction of 13 forts, four *fortins* and 14 intermediary redoubts that would significantly expand the radius of the entrenched camp, with a further four forts at Dendermonde, considered as an annexe. Forts 1 to 8 of Antwerp's 1859 project were to be updated and converted into a continuous belt of defences. These constructed, both Antwerp and Dendermonde were to be relieved of their old walls.⁵⁶⁰ This was particularly welcomed by the local population, who despite their aversion to military spending, was keen to obtain further territorial concessions

⁵⁵⁹ Stevenson, 'Fortifications', p. 831.

⁵⁶⁰ *Belgique Militaire*, 4 February 1906, pp. 105-106.

that would allow an increase to the port's commercial capacity. Indeed, the development of new deep-water quays was seen as essential to once again attracting large vessels to Antwerp, which in recent years had taken their trade to the likes of Hamburg, Rotterdam and Dunkirk.⁵⁶¹ The removal of some older defences would provide the space on which to build, but the government was adamant that the largely undesirable new fortifications were a necessary corollary. Providing that they were built at a sufficient distance from the city, so as to allow for future expansion and to ensure that the outlying suburbs were not cut off, this was an acceptable solution for the commercial centre.⁵⁶²

For their largely Catholic and anti-militaristic representatives, it remained a difficult prospect to accept. The rhetoric emanating from the party leadership since the construction of the Meuse forts had detailed strict limits to military expenditure, and this project, they feared, would leave the electorate feeling betrayed. Only after a series of modifications to the initial plans, that limited the potential costs and demands on manpower, was the Right finally mollified and coerced into dropping its joint opposition with the Liberals who had once again seen a political opportunity to exploit. These included the decision to declassify the bridgehead at Dendermonde in favour of a more lightly-garrisoned strongpoint on the Ruppel; guarantees that the projected constructions on the left bank of the Scheldt were to be abandoned; and a demonstration that much of the cost was to be compensated for by the sale of land on which the soon-to-be demolished old fortifications stood. The Minister of War, Cousebant d'Alkemade, was accused by some quarters of having capitulated to the qualms of local residents and

⁵⁶¹ *Courrier de l'Escaut*, 26 January 1906.

⁵⁶² MRA Fonds Moscou 5029, 1906 Commission into the Second Line of Defence at Antwerp, 25 June 1906 – 26 January 1907. 2nd Meeting, 4 July 1906.

the anti-militarists in accepting these modifications, but maintained that the decision was fully justifiable in military terms.⁵⁶³

Indeed, the eventual 46,600,000 francs passed by the Chamber of Representatives still allowed for a sizeable redevelopment of Antwerp's defensive system. It was to receive another ring of 23 forts and *fortins* at a distance of 15 to 20 kilometres from the city centre. Once constructed, the perimeter measured an astonishing 110 kilometres. This was second in size only to Paris' defences, which spanned 125 kilometres in circumference.⁵⁶⁴ Yet the question remained over who was going to man it. Senior officers had clearly hoped that an increase in the capacity of Antwerp's defences would engender a move towards personal service. The campaign for its introduction had not weakened since the passing of its most vocal advocate, Brialmont, in 1902. If anything its proponents, much like those in Britain's own National Service League, became increasingly active when faced with the prospect of confronting rising European tensions with an inadequate voluntary force.⁵⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the government was adamant to retain some favour, at least, with its own Party, and argued that an increase to the establishment was unnecessary. Two new inundation zones and faith in the reorganised fortress forces saw to that.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶³ *Belgique Militaire*, 18 March, 1906.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 4 February 1906, p. 106. Other figures suggest that the perimeter was no more than 95 kilometres in length. See, Stevenson, 'Fortifications', p. 847.

⁵⁶⁵ For more on the National Service League in Great Britain see, I.F.W. Beckett, 'The nation in arms, 1914-18', in I.F.W. Beckett & K. Simpson (eds.), *A nation in arms: A social study of the British army in the First World War* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1985), pp. 4-6; and Bowman & Connelly, *Edwardian Army*, pp. 47-48 & 159-162.

⁵⁶⁶ *Belgique Militaire*, 18 March, 1906. Prior to 1902, the fortress artillery at Antwerp, Liège, Namur, Dendermonde, Diest and Huy was split into 58 active and seven reserve batteries, along with three special companies. After the 1902 reorganisation, it was increased to 50 active and 27 reserve batteries. Similarly, the infantry had consisted of the 13th and 14th Line Infantry Regiments (each comprised of three active and two reserve battalions), the three reserve battalions of the Regiment of Carabiniers, and the 32 reserve battalions of the remaining infantry regiments. This totalled six active and

The newest dissenting voice was that of Georges Eugène Victor Ducarne, Chief of the General Staff from 1905-1910, whose many publications and speeches during this period spearheaded the drive for compulsion. He argued that Belgium ought to have had an army four times the size of its current establishment if the usual proportion of ten per cent of a nation's population typically joined the colours as they did elsewhere.⁵⁶⁷ In 1911 he published a series of articles entitled 'Are We Ready?' ('*Sommes-nous Prêts?*') in *Le Soir*, which caused many to take note of the deficiencies in the nation's defence.⁵⁶⁸ Certainly, the recruitment debacle had been partly resolved by the introduction of the 1909, one-son per family law, but it would not be until May 1913 that full conscription would see the army attempt to obtain a short-service field force of 340,000 men by 1925. However, this ought only to be viewed as a partial success, and was clearly done so by foreign observers whose interest in Belgian preparedness and strategic policy increased in the decade preceding the outbreak of war.

A succession of French military attachés to Brussels, for example, reported on almost a daily basis to the Quay d'Orsay on all aspects of Belgian military developments during this period. Captain Louis-Marie-Eugène-Victor Drury, in the role from 1909 until 1911, was particularly concerned over the state of the Antwerp defences, the supporting field army, and the seemingly Germanophile sympathies of senior officers that might imperil France. In relation to Antwerp, he noted in November

39 reserve battalions, prior to 1902. After this date, the 13th and 14th Line Infantry Regiments retained their association with the fortress, albeit now formed of three active, one reserve and two fortress battalions. They were joined by the 35 newly-formed fortress battalions of the remaining infantry regiments. See *Exposé 1902*, Tome I, p. 451; and Leclair, *L'Infanterie*, p. 65.

⁵⁶⁷ V. Ducarne, *Supplément au Bulletin de la Défense National de Janvier 1911: Conférence donnée le 29 novembre 1911 à la Conférence du Jeune Barreau par le Lieutenant general Ducarne: La question militaire en Belgique*. (Brussels, 1911), p. 15.

⁵⁶⁸ *Le Soir*, 31 August 1911; 1, 2, 3, 21 September 1911; and 29 November 1911.

1910, following a conversation with Lieut.-General Docteur, who was overseeing the construction of the new forts, that delays of over a year were to be expected on account of indecision over the maritime installations. This had meant that only two forts on the lower Scheldt had been started, and completion was not projected before 1913 or 1914.⁵⁶⁹ This, along with financial complications, accounted for the difficulties encountered in arming the new forts. Indeed, the four Saint-Chammond 240mm pieces delivered to Lillo and Berendrecht on the right bank of the Scheldt, were only furnished with a single round each.⁵⁷⁰ More concerning, was the fact that the fortifications in which the eight 280mm Krupp guns were due to be mounted remained uncompleted at the time of delivery, forcing the German company to keep them in storage until the outbreak of war, after which they were, rather ironically, used against the Belgians on the Yser.⁵⁷¹

Perhaps on account of a lack of confidence that resulted from Belgium's unpreparedness, foreign observers paid close attention to strategic developments that accompanied its fortress redevelopments. Drury reported on the conflicting viewpoints that were emanating from all quarters of the officer corps that had a direct impact on France's own preparations. For example, in 1900 Ducarne presented two papers concerning Belgium's international obligations and the strength of the army. He noted that in the event of a German invasion, the Belgian army's role could be defined as: 'taking up a waiting position, as soon as possible, on the flank of the German army corps' movements, so as to interrupt the march of their columns, force them to halt and await our shock, or to bring them to attack us in positions known to us.' He continued

⁵⁶⁹ SHD 7 N 1156, Report by Drury, 20 November 1910.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., Report by Drury 4 January 1912; and Duchesne, 'Appréciations françaises', p. 196.

⁵⁷¹ J. Wullus-Rudiger, *La Belgique et l'Équilibre Européen* (Berger-Levrault, Paris, 1935), p. 67.

by stating that it was not just a matter of sitting on the defensive but to attack, in order to demonstrate strength and impartiality. This might see the army conduct operations as far as Neufchâteau, or five days' march from the Meuse in order to search out the right wing of the enemy. This he upheld in an anonymous article in *La Belgique Militaire* in 1906, where he continued to demonstrate an offensive spirit. He was confident that the Belgian army could mobilise and concentrate quicker than its enemies and afford it enough time to select the ground upon which to operate.⁵⁷²

Others, such as General Déjardin, expressed the complete opposite view. He argued that venturing as far as Arlon, deep in the province of Luxembourg, was imprudent, rather preferring to hold a defensive line on the left bank of the Meuse between Liège and Namur.⁵⁷³ There had been vague suggestions of establishing an entrenched camp at Libramont to cover this route, or at least to increase the numbers of *Chasseurs Ardennais* to patrol the area.⁵⁷⁴ However, the general consensus among the majority of officers was that the army ought to secure itself behind the Meuse and await developments. This would offer it the freedom of action to operate in relative safety, await foreign support, or retreat on Antwerp. The latter was seen as the most likely outcome albeit few wished to admit it. Among the few dissenting voices was that of the socialist leader Émile Vandeveld who was quoted as saying, 'The Belgian army? But it would look on from Antwerp. It would react like the African natives who watch the troops opposing them, but who, at the same time, have an eye on the scrubland in which they would throw themselves like rabbits.'⁵⁷⁵ This rather summed up what the rest of Europe feared.

⁵⁷² SHD 7 N 1156, Report by Drury, 9 November 1909.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁴ SHD, 7 N 1159, Report by Génie, 18 January 1914.

⁵⁷⁵ SHD 7 N 1156, Report by Drury, 9 November 1909.

Part of the problem lay in the constantly changing strategic direction emanating from the top of the military high command. One notable example epitomised this in 1910 when General Harry Jungbluth, the then Chief of the General Staff, requested Lt. Col. Baron de Ryckel prepare a paper considering alternatives to the strategy of central mobilisation, only for it to be completely discarded by his successor in 1912.⁵⁷⁶ It had sought to examine a recent appreciation within the Belgian officer corps of the French ‘cult of the offensive’ doctrine, following the 1911 manoeuvres, which would see the army adopt a much more aggressive approach on the frontiers. However, as with Ducarne’s ideas at the start of the century, caution from those in influential positions stifled their development.⁵⁷⁷ Naturally, the frequency with which the position of Chief of the General Staff changed hands was not just disruptive at the end of Jungbluth’s tenure. In fact, three men held the position between 1910 and 1914, causing the press to take note. It questioned the appointment of De Selliers de Moranville, for example, because he was within three years of the compulsory age of retirement, and had just followed predecessors who themselves had managed just two years apiece. It was, as *La Chronique* noted, ‘in spite of the post’s importance, we appear to consider it, here at home, as merely an honourable end to a career’.⁵⁷⁸ In light of the revered German model under the successful leadership of Moltke during the nineteenth century, this problem seemed all the more flagrant.

⁵⁷⁶ Galet, *Albert King of the Belgians*, pp. 4-6.

⁵⁷⁷ SHD 7 N 1156, Report by Drury, 9 November 1909; and 7 N 1157, Report by Drury 19 January 1912. For more on the French ‘cult of the offensive’, see D. Porch, ‘The French Army and the Spirit of the Offensive, 1900-14’ in B. Bond & I. Roy (eds.), *War and Society: A Yearbook of Military History* (Croom Helm, London, 1975), pp. 117-143; and A.J. Echevarria, ‘The Cult of the Offensive Revisited: Confronting Technological Change before the Great War’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2002), pp. 199-214.

⁵⁷⁸ *La Chronique*, 20 May 1914.

The uncertainty within the establishment did nothing to assure the Great Powers of Belgian preparedness or even willingness to fight in the event of future war. In January 1906, the British had entered into secret staff conversations through their military attaché to Brussels, Lieutenant Colonel N.W. Barnardiston, in order to ascertain what might be expected of the Belgians in the event of a war against Germany. These had been sanctioned under the Balfour Government, but were conducted under the direction of Sir Edward Grey and Lord Haldane when Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman took over office.⁵⁷⁹ In a series of meetings that ran into February, Barnardiston and Ducarne conceived of relatively detailed plans that envisioned a British force disembarking at French ports and being transported to support the Belgian field army that would have secured a defensive position on the Meuse. Although not entirely convinced of its capabilities, the British could be satisfied that such a small force could mobilise quickly enough to provide a delaying action, and were confident that they would do so. The enthusiasm of Ducarne at securing British support, albeit tacit and unbinding, would attest to that. One of the few accounts of these discussions, written after the event in 1932, indicated that the Belgian Chief of Staff said ‘the

⁵⁷⁹ There has been a significant amount of work conducted on British pre-war planning 1904-1914 that came to influence their dealings with the Belgians and the French. For some of the most prominent, see, J.E. Tyler, *The British Army and the Continent, 1904-1914* (E. Arnold, London, 1938); J.E. Helmreich, ‘Belgian Concern over Neutrality and British Intentions, 1906-1914’, *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 36, (1964), pp. 416-427; S.R. Williamson Jr, *The Politics of Grand Strategy: Britain and France Prepare for War, 1904-1914* (Massachusetts, 1969); N. d’Ombrain, *War Machinery and High Policy: Defence administration in peacetime Britain 1902-1914* (Oxford, 1973); J. Gooch, *The Plans of War: The General Staff and British Military Strategy c. 1900-1916* (London, 1974); D. French, *British Economic and Strategic Planning, 1905-1915* (London, 1982); K.M. Wilson, *The Policy of the Entente: Essays on the Determinants of British Foreign Policy, 1904-1914* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985); J. Stengers, ‘Belgium’ in Wilson. K. M. (ed.), *Decisions for War 1914* (Routledge, London, 1995), pp. 151-174; Philpott, *Anglo-French Relations*; and H. Strachan, ‘The British Army, its General Staff and the Continental Commitment 1904-1914’, in French, D. & Holden Reid, B. (eds.), *The British General Staff: Reform and Innovation c. 1890-1939* (Routledge, London, 2002), pp. 75-94.

happiest outcome, the most favourable, can be obtained by a convergent and simultaneous action by the allied forces. On the other hand, it would be a grave setback if this agreement does not materialise. Colonel Barnardiston assured me that everything would be done to this end.⁵⁸⁰

The anxiety demonstrated by the Belgians during these initial conversations is representative of their military concerns during this time. Yet these were to be further exacerbated when communications ceased when the British decided to explore the French option and nurture the *entente cordiale*. This, coupled with Edmund Morel's aggressive campaign against abuses in the Congo, further alienated the two nations to the point where, by 1911, the Belgian General Staff envisaged the possibility of having to counter a British invasion in their annual staff ride. Although not suggesting that staff rides were entirely representative of genuine strategic considerations, the fact that of the thirteen other staff rides between 1897 and 1913 seven had considered a French, and six a German, invasion would suggest that, in this case, they were not without relevance.⁵⁸¹ Indeed, Drury reported back to Paris in the summer of 1910 that a combination of the anti-Congo campaign and the accession of Albert I, a supposed

⁵⁸⁰ Capitaine F. Vandaele, wrote an article in 1932 based on his viewing of a report by Ducarne to the Minister of War (though failed to reference where it could be found), and it is from this that the majority of details concerning the 1906 conversations have been drawn. This report was the one found in the Belgian archives by the Germans in 1914 and doctored in order to provide legitimacy for an invasion based on the premise that a secret alliance had been concluded between Britain and Belgium in 1906. As a result it was taken to Berlin, where it is believed to still exist but is withheld from the public. See, F. Vandaele, 'Les "conversations" anglo-belges d'avant guerre', *Revue Belge des Livres, Documents et Archives de la Guerre 1914 – 18*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1932), pp. 63-69.

⁵⁸¹ For more on British reactions to the Congo see, M. E. Thomas, 'Anglo-Belgian Military Relations and the Congo Question, 1911-1913', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 25 (1953), pp. 157-165; T. Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa 1876-1912* (London, 1991), Pp. 586 – 595, and 662; R.O. Collins, *King Leopold, England, and the Upper Nile, 1899 – 1909* (New Haven, 1968), p. 303. For Belgian more on the Belgian General Staff see, W. Marsily, *Les chefs d'état – major de l'armée belge et le respect de la neutralité* (Lousanne & Paris, 1917).

Germanophile, had seen German influence in the country noticeably increase. Germany had, of course, been among the first to congratulate the Belgians on their annexation of the Congo in 1908. A year later, little appeared to have changed, with Drury noting, ‘This campaign has, certainly, alienated Great Britain from the sympathies of the Belgians.’⁵⁸²

When the British came to reopen staff conversations with the Belgians in April 1912, following renewed European tensions after the Agadir Crisis, it was a much colder affair. The Germanophile Jungbluth had more reason to be suspicious of British motives than his predecessor in 1906. However, the British, through their military attaché Lieutenant Colonel Tom Bridges, were determined to extract from Belgium a pledge of support in the event of a German invasion. He was asked to discuss many things; among them, the feasibility and assistance available for a British landing at Oostende, Zeebrugge and Antwerp.⁵⁸³ As the conversations progressed, Bridges recounted in his memoirs, ‘On one occasion I was asked what would be Great Britain’s attitude if Germany invaded Belgium and Belgium did not appeal for help’, demonstrating the continued suspicions which had been fostered over the previous five years. The attaché replied that he ‘had no authority to say but that [he] felt sure that the British Government would regard intervention under terms of the Treaty as not only a duty but a right. At the same time [he] added, an appeal for help from Belgium would enormously strengthen the hand of our Government by rousing the sentiment of the country.’⁵⁸⁴ Furthermore, Bridges revealed that it was generally assumed that the Belgian army would be incapable, even if it did fight, to halt a German advance and as

⁵⁸² SHD 7 N 1156, Report by Drury, 8 June 1910; and 7 N 1157, Report by Drury 9 December 1911.

⁵⁸³ T. Bridges, *Alarms and Excursions: Reminiscences of a soldier* (London, 1938), p. 62.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

such British aid would be required at the decisive point and, importantly, speedily to have any serious effect. Indeed British thinking, based on the widely held assumption that Belgium would not fight, argued that it was her right, duty and obligation as a guarantor to ‘move into Belgium and expel German troops from Belgian soil.’⁵⁸⁵ This was completely unacceptable to Jungbluth as it undermined Belgium’s neutrality. Whether the Belgians required military support or not, it was imperative that the decision rested with them. The French government had recognised this fact by restricting Foch’s Plan XVII from incorporating a pre-emptive advance across the border, albeit unbeknownst to the Belgians.⁵⁸⁶

As such, the military conversations in the decade preceding the outbreak of war complicated Belgian planning to the point where neither themselves, nor their potential allies, knew how they were likely to proceed in the event of an invasion. Indeed, the British remained unconvinced of Belgium’s commitment to oppose a German invasion until the event itself spurred a call for aid on 4 August. By this point, however, none of the pre-war plans for co-operation could be put into action. Instead, the Belgians reverted to their long-established mobilisation plans and concentrated their forces in the centre of the country in a steadfast demonstration of strict neutrality. This involved sending detachments of cavalry to the German and French frontiers to screen the movements of the 1st, 3rd, 4th and 5th Army Divisions heading towards the predetermined points in Flanders, to face a possible British threat, Liège to face the Germans, and Namur and Maubeuge/Lille to face the French. Only after irrefutable evidence was received confirming the direction from which the invading force was coming, were the

⁵⁸⁵ TNA, WO 106/47, DMO to CIGS, Appreciation of the Political and Military Situation in Europe, 20 September, 1911.

⁵⁸⁶ Porch, *March to the Marne*, pp. 228-229; and E. Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014), pp. 19-21.

non-endangered divisions moved to the threatened sector on the rivers Meuse and Jette where they fought in conjunction with the fortresses before retiring behind the walls of Antwerp.

When faced with the German siege artillery that had so easily reduced the fortifications on the Meuse, the uncompleted works of Antwerp were similarly fated. Even the completed forts of Waelhem and Wavre-St. Catherine, which were expected to provide some resistance as examples of what was considered a ‘perfect design’, were almost demolished by the 420mm shells.⁵⁸⁷ The fate of the remaining defences was also compromised by the differing views on how best to conduct operations. Whilst under the walls of Antwerp, command fell to the position’s Governor, whose concerns were primarily to retain contact with the British and French, rather than to conduct operations independently of the city. The problem was, as highlighted throughout the fortress debate, a want of sufficient manpower to adequately cover the perimeter.⁵⁸⁸ Ultimately, the German guns rendered this point moot, and the authorities were forced to contemplate the evacuation of the entrenched camp on 1 October (suspended until 9 October) in the face of overwhelming force for which neither the army nor the fortress was prepared.

The principle of the concentration of forces evolved little over the course of the nineteenth century although the means by which it was sustained underwent significant changes. From the outset, Belgium struggled to come to terms with the socio-military conundrum of assimilating national defence (including fortresses and effective strength of the army) with the demands of the localities charged with upholding a contested

⁵⁸⁷ Lt.-Gen. E. Galet, *Albert King of the Belgians in the Great War* (trans. Maj.-Gen. Sir E. Swinton, London, Putnam, 1931), pp. 201-210.

⁵⁸⁸ Strachan, *To Arms*, p. 271.

concept of neutrality. The invasion scare of 1848 led to a reassessment of the power of international law, which was subsequently buttressed by the entrenched camp and national redoubt of Antwerp in 1859. From here, the army and the nation would be able to concentrate its strength and oppose an invasion by force, if necessary, whilst awaiting succour from a guarantor power. However, developments in European diplomacy and military technology soon undermined the foundations upon which this principle was established. Further military expenditure was required to salvage it through a redevelopment of the Meuse fortifications that would allow an army to operate more effectively in the immediate vicinity of what had become the most likely invasion route. These constructions produced a controversial political storm that once again demonstrated how national questions could be subordinated behind local and party interests. Only with further guarantees that the establishment would not be raised in conjunction with the fortifications (despite its obvious necessity) was enough cross-party support garnered to pass these important modifications. Similar events occurred two decades later when Antwerp required further redevelopment. By holding the government to account over the size of the army in order to pass the credits for its fortifications, the electorate and their representatives, largely undermined what the army was attempting to achieve. It prompted concern from neighbouring countries and stifled the development of a concerted plan of action in the event of a European conflagration that seemed all too likely. When it finally came to pass, Belgium reverted to its established plans of mobilisation and concentration, merely out of want of a better plan that had been refused serious contemplation. The army, in the midst of its belated reforms, went to war against a numerically and materially superior enemy without the close aid it had desired from its guarantors and behind defences that would prove, very quickly, to be unsuited for a modern war.

Chapter 6 - The First World War

When the Belgian army mobilised for war on 30 July 1914, few expected it to perform with any great distinction. A linguistically, politically and religiously fractured country that had allowed its armed forces to fall into a state of unpreparedness during the nineteenth century clearly did not have the capabilities of halting the German juggernaut. However, it was never meant to. As such, its performance during the defensive retreat from the Meuse to the Yser, via Antwerp, had much to commend it and demonstrated a surprising unity of action that resembled something nearing national pride. Albert I, King of the Belgians, exemplified this by obstinately pursuing national objectives to the chagrin of his coalition partners for the duration of hostilities. It demonstrated an agency in the self-determination of a sovereign state that has systematically been ignored in accounts of the First World War, primarily concerned with the participation of the Great Powers. The maintenance of the Belgian army on Belgian soil for the duration of the war was of paramount importance in retaining the nation's independence and dictated the ensuing singularity of its experience compared to other belligerents. Indeed, given the relative lack of operational activity between November 1914 and April 1918, the Belgian army's primary task was simply to endure.⁵⁸⁹ Discipline and morale, became the focus of their attentions as they battled against physical and psychological deprivations caused by the occupation of their country. Separation from loved ones and news of atrocities heightened the anxiety of the average soldier to the point where war-weariness was seemingly inevitable. When

⁵⁸⁹ The term 'endure' is taken to mean the individual and collective coping mechanisms to combat deprivation, a sense of disempowerment, and war weariness as illustrated in A. Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008).

combined with unresolved pre-war tensions and a breakdown in officer-man relations, it is little wonder that *Flamingantism* reared its head as the winter of 1917-18 passed by with seemingly no end to the war in sight. However, to view the peaceful demonstrations as a severe breakdown of discipline or an undermining of the newly established unity that had seen both Flemings and Walloons answer the nation's call would be a mistake. The crisis of the First World War must still be viewed as a unifying event, where both Flemish and Walloon concepts of what it meant to be Belgian were proudly exhibited in a bid to reassert the Kingdom's independence as one nation. The issue at hand was to establish parity between the two identities in the midst of a conflict whose length and intensity tested the endurance and social fabric of more nations than one.

First World War historians have readily dismissed images of jingoistic fervour upon the outbreak of war across Europe.⁵⁹⁰ Belgium was no different, especially given the direct threat posed by a probable invasion. Yet street parties and renditions of the *Brabançonne*, even before hostilities began, heralded what Alex Watson has termed a 'defensive patriotism' across the nation that may have been misconstrued as something akin to war enthusiasm.⁵⁹¹ Jubilant scenes similarly greeted the arrival of the Royal Family in Brussels on 4 August, despite news of the German incursion into Belgium. It demonstrated an affection for the monarchy as a focal point of unity in the defence of the nation. *L'Indépendance Belge* reported cheering crowds, music and 'a delirium of admirable patriotism, without precedent' outside Parliament at the Place de la Nation.

⁵⁹⁰ C. Pennell, *A United Kingdom: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012), pp. 38-43.

⁵⁹¹ MRA, Fonds Personalia, 13/43, René Levèvre, *Souvenirs de Guerre 1914-1918*, p. 2; A. Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary at War, 1914-1918* (Penguin Books, London, 2014), pp. 71-72.

In the Chamber itself, the Duc d'Ursel, a Catholic Senator from Mechelen, who had appeared in uniform from his local *Régiment de Guides*, received many congratulations from his peers, while enthusiastic shouts of 'Vive le Roi' accompanied the announcement of the King's arrival, including from all the Socialists.⁵⁹² In his speech, King Albert called upon the warring parties to make peace and made clear the absolute necessity for courage and unity to form the cornerstones of national defence. He made a point of referring independently to both linguistic groups to join the national struggle by recalling the heroics of the Flemings during the Battle of the Golden Spurs and the Six Hundred *Franchimontois* for the Walloons.⁵⁹³ In appealing to both populations separately from the start, King Albert was acknowledging the disunity that had dominated the country's pre-war social and military milieus. Yet it also placed him at the forefront of national unification, which was to be reinforced over the course of the war.

Estimates concerning the strength of the army upon which he was able to call vary but the most often quoted figure of 117,000 regulars, supported by a further 73,000 fortress troops and auxiliaries (including the Civic Guard and Gendarmerie), saw approximately 190,000 men take to the field.⁵⁹⁴ These were divided into six army divisions (DA) numbering between 15,500 and 24,000 men and one cavalry division

⁵⁹² *L'Indépendance Belge*, 5 August, 1914; *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 5 August 1914.

⁵⁹³ De Vos, *Première Guerre*, p. 28. The Battle of the Golden Spurs (1302) had seen the Flemish provinces defeat a French army outside Kortrijk, whilst the Six Hundred *Franchimontois* (1468) saw the heroic defeat of Vincent de Beuren and Gosuin de Streel's small force as they attempted to reclaim Liège from Burgundian rule by ambushing the Duke of Burgundy and Louis XI.

⁵⁹⁴ A. De Schrijver, *La Bataille de Liège (Août 1914)* (Liège, 1922), p. 2; and I.F.W. Beckett, *The Making of the First World War* (Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2014), p. 20.

(DC) with an establishment of 4,000.⁵⁹⁵ Each division was made up of three or four brigades composed of two infantry regiments; a cavalry regiment; an artillery ‘group’ of 12, 75mm guns; and an additional artillery regiment of 36mm, 75mm and 150mm guns.⁵⁹⁶ Yet, despite the seemingly impressive numbers, comparable with the size of the British Expeditionary Force, Tom Simoens has suggested that as few as 14,000 men could truly be considered ‘regulars’. The majority of men were reservists, who had spent years away from the army with little meaningful training in the interim, whilst as many as 40,000 (28%) recalled conscripts actually failed to report to their depots upon mobilisation. Analogous deficits had similarly marred Belgium’s mobilisation during the Franco-Prussian War, although the reality of German boots on home soil did spark a spate of volunteerism that saw 18,000 men enlist to offset some of the deficit.⁵⁹⁷ Proportionately to its population, this figure reflected the similarly astonishing figure of 250,000 men estimated to have volunteered for the German land forces in the opening month of the war, despite them employing a system of conscription.⁵⁹⁸ This offered the first indications of a renewed sense of national pride that had all too often been absent when faced with the prospect of fulfilling military obligations.

Fighting began in earnest in the Liège area on 5 August as the German army sought to break through between Bonnelles and l’Ourthe towards the fortress to

⁵⁹⁵ A. de Selliers de Moranville, *Contribution à l’histoire de la Guerre Mondiale 1914 – 1918* (Goemaere, Brussels, 1933), p. 627. His detailed breakdown by division suggests a total of 117,500 regulars.

⁵⁹⁶ De Vos, *Première Guerre*, p. 23. De Vos’ measures the total strength at approximately 200,000.

⁵⁹⁷ T. Simoens, ‘Het Belgische Leger’, in L. De Vos (et.al.), *14 – 18 Oorlog in België* (Davidsfonds Uitgeverij, Leuven, 2014), p. 33.

⁵⁹⁸ A. Watson, ‘For Kaiser and Reich’: The Identity and Fate of the German Volunteers, 1914-1918’, *War in History*, vol. 12, no, 1 (2005), pp. 47-48.

accomplish the well documented *coup de main*.⁵⁹⁹ The Belgian field army had moved from its original mobilisation positions facing all borders to the River Gette, North of the Meuse fortresses, to counter the enemy's advance. King Albert, who had taken on the Constitutional role of Commander-in-Chief, established his General Headquarters (*grand-quartier-général* (GQG)) in Leuven and immediately immersed himself in the task of directing operations. Despite having been schooled as a soldier from an early age, it proved a daunting task for the monarch who felt the need to draw heavily on the experience of his advisors. Recognising that his army was ill-equipped to undertake successful offensive operations, King Albert initially heeded the prudent counsel of the Chief of the General Staff, Antonin de Selliers de Moranville, who wished to remain on the strategic defensive behind the river Gette. Whilst the majority of the army did so, two divisions, 3DA and 4DA, were kept in the Liège and Namur vicinities respectively to offer support to the fortresses. Despite courageous efforts to hold ground, 3DA was all but routed by 7 August, as the first German shells hit Liège and the infantry's advance culminated in the fabled surrender of the citadel to Ludendorff's knock on the gates. Local command of the area was placed in the hands of Lieutenant-General Georges Leman who conducted operations from the outlying forts, while King Albert and his staff contemplated saving the remainder of the field army.

The vindication of de Selliers' fears over not uniting the entirety of the field army ought to have consolidated his position as the King's most trusted advisor. Yet the intrigue within GQG merely intensified as officers jostled for positions of influence. Even the Prime Minister, Charles de Broqueville, complained of being marginalised as King Albert's circle of confidants grew more exclusive and insular. According to his

⁵⁹⁹ R. Foley, *Alfred von Schlieffen's Military Writings* (Frank Cass, London & Portland, 2003), p. 179; D. Stevenson, *1914-1918 The History of the First World War* (Penguin Books, London, 2012), p. 51; and D. Stevenson, 'Battlefield or Barrier?', pp. 482-483.

biographer, Henri Haag, not once was he called to GQG for consultation over operational plans in the opening week of hostilities and only learned of their existence after the events had occurred.⁶⁰⁰ This was a particularly concerning issue, given that de Broqueville also held the portfolio for Minister of War and was constitutionally bound to countersign the orders of the Commander-in-Chief both as a parliamentary safeguard as well as protecting the monarch from accusations of wrongdoing. However, a combination of a lack of military expertise and the need to run civil affairs from Brussels meant that de Broqueville did not join King Albert at GQG from the outset. In order to conform with his constitutional duty, a tacit agreement was struck that he would agree to countersign any decision by the King through his confidant, de Selliers, despite its seeming illegality. This did not remove the burden of responsibility from the shoulders of the Minister of War, but rather exposed the deficiencies of a system that did not allow for adequate co-operation between himself and the General Staff.⁶⁰¹ From the outset, therefore, a gulf was established in civil-military relations that proved increasingly difficult to bridge and gave free rein to the military authorities to advise the King in the conduct of operations without parliamentary restraints for the duration of the war.

Although de Broqueville had somewhat helped foster this unenviable situation, he naturally resented being pushed further to the peripheries. De Selliers attempted to keep the Premier informed of events but soon found himself a victim of internal rivalries too. On 10 August, the Chief of the General Staff was side-lined as Lieut.-Gens Harry Jungbluth and Baron Louis de Ryckel, as well as Captain Commandant Émile Galet, of the Royal Household gained favour. The following day, de Selliers was

⁶⁰⁰ H. Haag, *Le comte Charles de Broqueville, Ministre d'État, et les luttes pour le pouvoir (1910-1940)* Tome I, (Louvain-la-Neuve & Brussels, 1990), p. 236.

⁶⁰¹ de Selliers, *Contribution*, p. XLV.

removed as Chief of the General Staff. Both he and de Broqueville tendered their resignations, which were flatly refused, leaving the Premier temporarily blind in matters of military operations. This was especially the case when the remaining officers with personal affiliations to him turned down his advances in order to secure their own positions at GQG under the increasing control of the King.⁶⁰²

By 13 August the German army began to make some headway against the outlying Liège forts, which had refused to surrender. Two 420mm Krupp guns had been brought up to the village of Mortier to support the 305mm Skoda pieces to destroy the fort of Pontisse with 13 direct hits.⁶⁰³ Fléron fell the next day, whilst Loncin was literally lifted from the ground on the 15th, burying 300 of its occupants, when a shell pierced the concrete structure and hit the powder magazine. General Leman, who had been conducting the defence of the area from Loncin, was injured and taken prisoner. Officers from neighbouring forts were invited by the Germans to view the ruins, which accelerated the capitulation of the forts of Flémalle and d'Hollogne.⁶⁰⁴ Resistance was finally broken at Liège on 16 August, while to the Southwest, the fortress of Namur, supported by 4DA, held out until 24 August when its garrison was forced into a disorderly retreat by overwhelming forces.

Whilst the position at Liège was eventually lost, the battle had exhibited an unexpected tenacity among the Belgian defenders despite their inferior numbers and materiel. Liège had tied down up to 100,000 German troops, which had allowed the rest of the field army to escape, whilst Namur held up 153,000 men that may have been

⁶⁰² For more detail on the estrangement of de Selliers and de Broqueville, see Haag, *de Broqueville*, Tome 1, pp. 232-239; and de Selliers de Moranville, *Contribution*, pp. 270-271.

⁶⁰³ M. Prášil, *Skoda Heavy Guns* (Schiffer Military/Aviation History, Atglen, PA, 1997), pp. 6-10.

⁶⁰⁴ De Vos, *Première Guerre*, p. 34.

decisive in the Battle of the Frontiers.⁶⁰⁵ The Meuse fortresses had, in effect, achieved their objectives in delaying the German onslaught. However, as Hew Strachan noted, despite resisting for 13 days, in reality the delay to the Schlieffen Plan was at most two, as the concentration of active corps was not completed until 13 August.⁶⁰⁶ Notwithstanding, it must be remembered that the forts had been built primarily as strongpoints upon which the army could manoeuvre, not as an impregnable barrier. Certainly, they had been provisioned to hold out for longer, but the reality was that the unaltered structures of the late 1880s were simply unable to cope with the calibre and explosive power of modern heavy artillery.

Faced with the loss of Liège and a worsening situation, de Broqueville obtained an audience with the King to discuss the eventuality of a German breakthrough towards the centre of the country and Brussels itself. A working relationship between the two was re-established through the reinstatement of de Selliers to his former position, providing yet another voice of prudence amidst the German advance on 18 August.⁶⁰⁷ Following heavy fighting around Aarschot on 21 August, and with the army in danger of encirclement, the decision was taken to fall back on the national redoubt at Antwerp where the rest of the Royal Family, the Government and a swarm of refugees had already fled. The chaos of war appeared to be in full force as soldiers recorded the volume of orders and counter-orders issued as the army was forced to retreat.⁶⁰⁸ Approximately 80,000 men reached Antwerp, which itself boasted a garrison of 70,000 fortress troops. The majority of losses had been sustained by 3DA and 4DA in their

⁶⁰⁵ Terlinden, *Histoire Militaire*, pp. 332 & 339.

⁶⁰⁶ H. Strachan, *The First World War: Volume I To Arms* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001), pp. 211-212.

⁶⁰⁷ Haag, *de Broqueville*, Tome 1, p. 243.

⁶⁰⁸ MRA, Fonds Personalía, 2/16, René Deckers, *Journal de Campagne 1914-1918*, p. 3. Entry for 21 August 1914.

attempts to support the fortresses, with many of those who were not casualties or prisoners forced to undertake the arduous journey through northern France to Le Havre or Cherbourg for embarkation to re-join the main force in Antwerp.⁶⁰⁹

Pleas for French and British assistance to move further north were largely ignored as Joffre rubbished the reports reaching him of the strength of the German forces facing the Belgians.⁶¹⁰ The difficulties of fighting in coalition became blatantly apparent as the physical gap between the Belgian and allied forces was only outgrown by the impassable gulf in aims and expectations. While King Albert saw the primary objective of the guarantor powers to eject the invader from Belgian territory, Joffre viewed the sub-standard Belgian army merely as an 'adjunct to a grand allied conception orchestrated by himself.'⁶¹¹ The apparent gravity of the situation on the Marne did see King Albert attempt to relieve some pressure through co-ordinated diversionary attacks around Antwerp on 9 and 10 September, which retook Aarschot and even reached Leuven. However, the effect of these sorties is somewhat debateable, despite forcing the Germans to recall reinforcements being moved to face the allies. The majority were reserve divisions; a fact duly glossed over by Belgium's definitive operational history of the war.⁶¹²

Growing German pressure, through von Beseler's reinforcements and the moving up of heavy artillery from 27 September, firmly placed the Belgians on the

⁶⁰⁹ One example saw the 1st Lancers march for 13 days and 13 nights along with disparate elements of 4DA to reach Le Havre before re-joining the army in Antwerp on the 6th September. See, *Historique du 1er Régiment de Lanciers*, p. 10.

⁶¹⁰ Galet, *Albert King of the Belgians*, pp, 148-151; Philpott, *Anglo-French Relations*, pp. 19-21; and Philpott, 'Britain', p. 125.

⁶¹¹ Strachan, *First World War*, p. 216.

⁶¹² M. Tasnier & R. Van Overstraeten, *L'Armée belge dans la Guerre Mondiale* (Brussels, 1931), p. 143; De Vos, *Première Guerre*, pp. 38 & 47-48; and J.E. Edmonds, *History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium 1914* (Imperial War Museum, London, 1933), p. 357.

back foot. Having always recognised the capital importance of Antwerp, the British Cabinet sanctioned the dispatch of the 7th Division to the relief of Antwerp on 1 October providing that the French would do the same. Unwilling to weaken his overall strategy of envelopment for what he considered a futile operation, Joffre merely released a Territorial Division and a brigade of marine fusiliers, leading to the British decision not to risk their own regulars without adequate support.⁶¹³ Judging it more important to facilitate the junction between all armies, the French Territorials were only deployed in the Poperinghe area, sending only the marines to the city. Given the decision to evacuate the government on 1 and 2 October, the British were more forthcoming in their efforts to save the city and its garrison after this point. Through correspondence with their military attaché, Sir Francis Villiers, it was learnt that the Belgian field army was also to be evacuated, producing an impromptu visit to Antwerp by Winston Churchill on 3 October to better grasp the situation and delay any such decision for ten days until a Franco-British relief force could be assembled. In the meantime, two Naval Brigades were disembarked in Dunkirk, bound for Antwerp, to be interspersed among the beleaguered Belgian troops ‘to impart the encouragement and assurance that succour was at hand.’⁶¹⁴

Ultimately, the relief force could not be concentrated in time and heavy fighting between 4 and the 8 October forced King Albert’s hand. In consort with his advisors as well as the Queen, the position was deemed untenable despite the promised aid. The army left that night, heading south towards the Gent-Terneuzen Canal, eventually reaching the River Yser on 14 October. Despite leaving the fortress troops behind to

⁶¹³ I.F.W. Beckett, *Ypres: The First Battle, 1914* (Routledge, London, 2006), pp. 22-31.

⁶¹⁴ W. Churchill, *The World Crisis 1911-1918* Volume I (Odhams Press, London, 1939), p. 315.

cover the retreat, the city was forced to capitulate on 9 October, prompting a mass exodus of some 33,000 Belgian troops to flee towards the Netherlands where they were interned for the duration of the war.⁶¹⁵ It was not a decision taken lightly, but the very real threat of being cut off through a German movement further south would have all but ended the army's participation in the conflict and, in turn, the continued existence of an independent Belgium. As King Albert noted in his war diary on 1 January 1915 when refuting advances made by Sir John French to have the remaining Belgian forces amalgamated into the British army: 'My country can only make its existence felt through its Army and it would never understand a change which would be equivalent to suppressing the latter.'⁶¹⁶ This reflected the attitude and action of a King and a country that has all too often been denied its rightful agency. Belgium was not simply a geographical location where the war took place; it was a sovereign nation capable of playing its own individual role in a conflict that threatened its future. Indeed, Elizabeth Greenhalgh's and William Philpott's claims that it was respectively Joffre's or Foch's influence that persuaded the Belgians to hold the Yser line rather than retreat to Calais is a case in point.⁶¹⁷ The French merely suggested that the Belgians should reorganise in the region of Nieupoort-Furnes-Dixmuide.⁶¹⁸ It was unquestionably King Albert's decision, based on his personal appraisal of the situation, which required the maintenance of a Belgian force on Belgian soil for purposes of morale and international prestige. In a worst-case scenario, King Albert envisaged withdrawing his remaining forces to Britain and not to France, but fervently refuted any contemplation of further

⁶¹⁵ De Vos, *Première Guerre*, p. 49.

⁶¹⁶ Albert I, *The War Diaries of Albert I King of the Belgians: Published from the Original Manuscript and in their Entirety*. Edited by R. Van Overstraeten (William Kimber, London, 1954), p. 27.

⁶¹⁷ Greenhalgh, *French Army*, p. 51; Philpott, 'Britain', p. 126.

⁶¹⁸ J. Vanwelkenhuyzen, 'Le Haut Commandement Belge et les Alliés en 1914-1918 et en Mai 1940', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1983), p. 9.

retreat anyway, warning all divisional commanders that they would be dismissed if they abandoned their positions, and all officers and men that fleeing would result in being shot, and absence through sickness in court martial.⁶¹⁹

While further stubbornness in the pursuit of national interests punctuated the coalition's relationship with the King for the rest of the war, it was a clear reminder that they were dealing with an active ally and not a submissive appendage. Clear in his own mind of Belgium's wartime policy, King Albert frequently clashed with the Entente's strategic and operational planning. Having never signed the September 1914 Pact of London that committed the allied nations to concerted action, King Albert was free to do as he pleased; though in doing so became increasingly isolated from his allies. In pursuing a separate diplomatic and military policy through 1916 and 1917, the Belgians were unable to influence discussions at Chantilly and were enraged at proposals for a British offensive from Ypres in 1916 across Belgian soil.⁶²⁰ Nevertheless, King Albert retained independence of action for the duration of the war, as was his right, and continued to exercise it to what he believed was the benefit of his kingdom.

The ensuing Battle of the Yser was undoubtedly the most important action of the war for the ailing Belgian army. From the first German offensive on 18 October until the completion of the inundations on the 31st (which effectively ended the conduct of major operations between Nieupoort and Ypres for the remainder of the war) the tenacity, courage and resources of the now just 75,000 strong Belgian army were severely tested. Despite facing mainly reserve and *Ersatz* Divisions, the weight of numbers and the disorganisation of the Belgians saw the Germans cross the Yser at Tervate on 21 October. By the 24th, the situation looked even worse, despite French

⁶¹⁹ Beckett, *Making of the First World War*, p. 22.

⁶²⁰ Philpott, 'Britain', pp. 122-123.

support. The railway line between Dixmude and Nieupoort came under threat and was only held onto by the Belgians during a small respite in the fighting when the Germans were found to lack reserves. This lull, coupled with the opening of the locks at Nieupoort (at the third attempt in as many days) brought an end to the battle that claimed 14,000 Belgian casualties and much of its materiel.⁶²¹ It was a much needed reprieve for a force that had become so weary and demoralised by the engagement as to genuinely raise concerns within the French high command that contact between their troops and Belgian remnants might see the demoralisation spread.⁶²² Despite Foch's subsequent attempts to claim the idea to flood the area as his own, his suggestion, allegedly made to the Belgians on 25 October, was actually concerned with the Dunkirk region and not the Yser. The proposition was made as early as 19 October by the chief lockmaster Gerard Dingens, although others such as Captains Commandant Delarmoy and Nuyten have similarly been attributed credit. Irrespective of this, it was clearly a Belgian decision based on the deteriorating military situation.⁶²³

The action was decisive in as much as it ensured the continued presence of Belgian soldiers on Belgian soil, tied up German units opposite them, and blocked the route to Calais. On a wider scale, the decision to unleash the 'silent conqueror' that created a lagoon of between 18 and 21 miles in length, between 1¾ and 2½ miles in width, and three to four feet deep has even been hailed as one of the major turning points of the war as it not only prevented a German breakthrough, but helped establish the deadlock on the Western Front by bookending one side of the frontline that ran from Switzerland to the sea.⁶²⁴ It was a defensive victory of which the small army could be

⁶²¹ De Vos, *Première Guerre*, pp. 56-60.

⁶²² IFFRC MI 7375, Diary of a Squadron-Commandant 1st Lancers, 27 October 1914.

⁶²³ Beckett, *Making of the First World War*, pp. 25-30.

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

proud, and one that the King, in his steadfast application to the role of Commander-in-Chief, could claim as his own.

Although the Belgian army largely achieved its objective of delaying the invading army long enough for help to reach it before collapse, the campaign had hardly been without fault. As de Selliers de Moranville recalled in 1915, the preparedness of the army to go to war had been severely compromised by the large-scale reorganisation of its forces and the glaring deficiencies in its equipment; particularly in heavy artillery.⁶²⁵ Not only had the pre-war political wrangling prevented the army from obtaining its desired establishment of 340,000 men in time but it had also led to a situation whereby men recruited under four different systems were recalled in 1914 to form its regiments; the majority of whom with no more than 15 months' service. In comparison to the French army's three-year-law and the German army's two-year regular term of service, the Belgian army appeared to lack the requisite training and experience. Compounding matters further was the lack of a suitable officer reserve that left many 'doubled-up' regiments lacking in quality officers.⁶²⁶ Indeed, upon the outbreak of war, there were only 420 reserve officers available for commission, though a steady influx of former Civic Guard officers returning to regular service swelled this number to 1,421 by 1917.⁶²⁷ Nevertheless, the quality of officers throughout the army was variable, with NCOs often taking on a far greater role than might otherwise have been the case. Even at senior levels, the fact that five out of six Divisional Commanders

⁶²⁵ AGR, POS 6505-160, De Selliers de Moranville to Van der Elst, 14 April 1915.

⁶²⁶ This was a process that saw each regiment double in size to form a brigade in itself, supported by an affiliated regiment of fortress troops. For example, the 2nd Line Infantry Regiment would double its cadre to form the basis of the 22nd Line Infantry Regiment as well. For more see, Leclair, *L'Infanterie*. pp. 66-67.

⁶²⁷ E.A. Jacobs, 'Climat psychologique du cadre de réserve belge avant 1914', *Revue Internationale de l'Histoire Militaire*, vol. 29 (1970), p. 813.

were relieved of their positions before Christmas 1914 demonstrated a general lack of ability to cope under the stresses of war.

Naturally, the pre-war decisions not to invest in heavy artillery or machine guns proved debilitating in the opening exchanges. Indeed, the field artillery was comprised almost entirely of 75mm rapid-firing guns, split into one group of three batteries (12 guns) per mixed brigade, or simply one or two groups per Division. As such, a total of just 348 guns, of which 12 were attached to the cavalry, represented a ratio of just below three guns for each infantry battalion.⁶²⁸ This followed the trend set in France of relying on high rates of fire to achieve quick results but was quickly made obsolete by the Germans, whose decision in 1908-9 to equip each division in its field army with 18 105mm howitzers, supplemented by a corps and reserve artillery comprised of 150mm and 210mm pieces, was soon vindicated.⁶²⁹ Despite its acclaim as an exceptional piece of equipment, the 75mm's restricted range of around six kilometres necessitated five Royal Navy cruisers to cover the Belgian army's lack of heavy artillery during the Yser campaign, which consisted of just 12 149mm guns and a single Krupp piece lifted from the Antwerp fortress during the evacuation.⁶³⁰ Similarly, a lack of foresight had restricted the number of machine guns in service upon the outbreak of war. A misappreciation of their future value had seen the Minister of War, Joseph Hellebaut, order just 40 Hotchkiss machine-guns in 1910 to be attached to the mobile defence force of Antwerp, whilst 104 Maxims (1911 model) delivered in 1912 were found to be nothing short of worthless after rigorous tests uncovered several faults.⁶³¹ On 1 August 1914,

⁶²⁸ 'Les opérations de l'Armée belge pendant la campagne de 1914-1918 (relation succincte) (suite)', *Bulletin Belge des sciences militaires*, no. 4 (1928), pp. 298-299.

⁶²⁹ S. Bidwell & D. Graham, *Fire-Power: The British Army Weapons & Theories of War 1904-1945* (Pen & Sword, Barnsley, 2004), pp. 14-17.

⁶³⁰ De Vos, *Première Guerre*, pp. 54-55; 'Les opérations', p. 300;

⁶³¹ Hellebaut, *Mémoires*, pp. 148-149.

the army had one machine gun company for each mixed brigade, totalling 120 pieces. This produced a ratio of just one machine gun per battalion, which proved to be wholly insufficient for the war ahead.⁶³² The mere fact that by the 15 August a further 94 Hotchkiss machine guns had been purchased to improve the army's firepower demonstrates the belated recognition of their worth and the mistakes made prior to the outbreak of war.

More tellingly, perhaps, was that the Belgian army felt incapable of contributing to any major offensives until 1918 while it recovered and re-organised its artillery. Manpower was at a premium until at least the start of 1916 by which time the army's effective strength had recovered to approximately 120,000 men. Calls for volunteers of able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 30 in 1914 were followed by a Royal Decree in March 1915, which effectively conscripted all 18 to 25-year-olds in unoccupied Belgium, Britain and France to form that year's contingent, with exemptions for those married prior to 15 November 1914. This was extended to all foreign countries on 6 November 1915 and eventually produced a respectable 18,000 recruits, not including the constant trickle of returnees and volunteers from occupied territory. A general appeal was again made on 21 July 1916 to obtain, within reason, the remaining manpower available without disrupting the work of industry or family. All Belgian men born between 30 June 1876 and 1 July 1898 were called up to serve in the army, factories, or the general interest. Married men born after 30 June 1886 and single men born after 30 June 1881 were to go to the army; the others to the auxiliary services. It furnished a further 21,000 combatants who began to be incorporated from September 1916. Two more laws in May 1917 and February 1918 further scraped the

⁶³² 'Les opérations', pp. 296-297.

barrel and obtained 2,000 and 3,300 men respectively, demonstrating that the manpower ceiling was not reached until relatively late in the war.⁶³³

Belgian industry took time to restart production following its relocation to sites in Northern France and across the United Kingdom. Even then, the factories in Le Havre and Birtley tended to focus on munitions production, forcing the army to acquire their desired artillery pieces from their allies. When up and running, Birtley could produce up to 20,000 shells each week and the skilled workers from Belgium's pre-war arms industry in Herstal and Liège, employed in a factory in Birmingham, were able to furnish 30,000 rifles and carbines along with other accoutrements in the same period by war's end.⁶³⁴ In the meantime, Captain-Commandant Blaise was placed in charge of procuring the required materiel to bring the army back up to strength, working closely with both allied Governments and the directors of firms such as Vickers in order to do so. The purchasing of 105mm, 120mm and 150mm Schneider guns from the French over the course of 1915 allowed a heavy artillery regiment to be created and for a more varied distribution of guns across the six Army Divisions.⁶³⁵ Similar advances were made to the British Government to obtain 9.2" and 12" guns as well as 6" mortars, although the War Office often deferred the final decision to GHQ in France which was more reluctant to see its equipment used by another army.⁶³⁶ To facilitate the procedure de Broqueville suggested to Blaise that he remind their allies that the Belgians were holding the longest front proportionate to the size of its army and that, if they broke, the road to Dunkirk and Calais would be wide open.⁶³⁷ While this was partially true in 1916, the chances of a major German offensive across the quagmire separating them

⁶³³ Tasnier & Van Overstraeten, *L'Armée belge*, pp. 316-318.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

⁶³⁵ 'Les opérations', pp. 299-300.

⁶³⁶ AGR, POS. 1510/90-548, Blaise to de Broqueville, 5 April 1916.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, de Broqueville to Captains Commandant Blaise and Quintin, 17 April 1916.

from the Belgians was minimal, especially given the concentration of reserve formations stationed in the sector due to its quiet nature. In the end, British guns were delivered to the Belgians with the caveat that the newly created 7th Artillery Regiment would support the British in the Ypres sector when required.⁶³⁸

By 1918 the Belgian army was in a much better state of preparedness in terms of its equipment and experience. Indeed, its artillery could now count on 12 days' worth of ammunition whilst a series of successful trench raids in late 1917 had given the infantry a sense of confidence in its offensive competency.⁶³⁹ Yet, it was the defence of Merckem in April 1918 during the German Spring offensives, which highlighted the newly acquired steel of the army, albeit against second rate troops. King Albert still had reservations about its offensive capabilities, but politics and prestige over-rode prudence as momentum shifted in the allies' favour. The Belgian army could not be seen to sit back and allow the allies to liberate the country for it and then expect to take a seat as an equal partner at the peace table.⁶⁴⁰ Against the advice of the King's counsellors, offensive operations under Foch's strategic overview were sanctioned. For the first time in over four years, King Albert agreed to subordinate himself to his allies in return for receiving command of a mixed Anglo-Franco-Belgian army group. The Army of Flanders comprised the British II Army, the Belgian Army and seven French corps of three divisions each as well as the 2nd Cavalry Corps and some artillery. Fearing that both he and his generals were perhaps too unfamiliar with offensive operations, King Albert undertook another bold move and a further co-operative measure by requesting General Degoutte, who had distinguished himself at the head of

⁶³⁸ Ibid.

⁶³⁹ Tasnier & Van Overstraeten, *L'Armée belge*, pp. 259 & 313.

⁶⁴⁰ For more on Belgian war aims see, D. Stevenson, 'Belgium, Luxemburg, and the Defence of Western Europe, 1914-1920', *The International History Review*, vol 4, no. 4 (1982), pp. 504-522.

the French 6th Army, to join his staff.⁶⁴¹ It was the first indication of a Belgian desire to fall in line with the Entente's strategic vision, and perhaps cynically only as a result of the turning tide. King Albert who had not always agreed with the decision to fight towards an uncompromised peace now saw an opportunity and felt that the time was right to push his newly combined forces towards a final decision.

The Belgian contribution to the 1918 offensive amounted to 167,000 men, 1,100 guns and 100 aircraft.⁶⁴² On the first day of the offensive (28 September) the nine Belgian infantry divisions made an eight-kilometre advance under heavy rains. Significant gains were made in the Houthulst Forest, while the British also achieved all their objectives. Albeit drawing to a conclusion, neither side knew that the war was to end within six weeks and fighting remained intense. The three-day offensive came at a cost of 10,000 casualties with many divisions reduced to 1,000 men. Belgian casualty figures of 1,012 officers and 29,056 NCOs and other ranks killed, wounded or missing between 28 September and 11 November underscores their commitment to the offensives to liberate their country.⁶⁴³ Although King Albert remained reluctant to fight to the bitter end for the sake of it, the Belgians felt that they were denied a victorious entrance into Brussels by the premature signing of the armistice.⁶⁴⁴ Gent was due to be liberated the following day and Brussels soon after. Nevertheless, the sight of Belgian troops participating in the final offensives was of great importance to national pride and was a timely reminder to all that they too had endured the war and contributed to its ultimately victorious conclusion.

⁶⁴¹ Tasnier & Van Overstraeten, *L'Armée belge*, p. 377.

⁶⁴² De Vos, *Première Guerre*, p. 156.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.*, 158; and Tasnier & Van Overstraeten, *L'Armée belge*, pp. 387 & 401.

⁶⁴⁴ Vanwelkenhuyzen, 'Haut Commandement', p. 32.

In the intervening years from the Yser campaign to the Hundred Days, the war changed for the Belgian army from one of fighting to one of recovery and subsequently endurance. By the time the army had reached the Yser, morale had sunk to worryingly low levels as a succession of military setbacks, weariness and a seemingly endless retreat all contributed to dampen the optimism of quick and victorious war. Indeed, among the older reservists and fortress troops, morale was said to be ‘deplorable and rather discouraging’ by November 1914 as the war of movement mutated into its static state.⁶⁴⁵

The retreat had placed unprecedented strain on the army as a whole, with many services, officers and men struggling to cope with the chaos of war. This accounts for the disproportionately high numbers of courts martial cases, which resulted in seven of Belgium’s 12 military executions being carried out before Christmas 1914. Confusion during the retreat certainly placed undue pressure on the antiquated military judicial system to act quickly, but the idea put forward by the likes of Siegfried Debaeke and Jacques Maes that the prosecutors acted arbitrarily and weakly ignores the extenuating circumstances and nuances of the situation.⁶⁴⁶ Certainly, the degree of leniency in the opening months of the war was much reduced by the King and the military authorities as a whole on account of the necessity to keep the army in the field. However, it was not disproportionately harsh compared to other armies. In fact, the French army, too, carried out a third of its wartime executions during the same period, underlining the

⁶⁴⁵ MRA, Fonds Personalia, 2/16, René Deckers, *Journal de Campagne 1914-1918*, p. 14. Entry for 6 November 1914.

⁶⁴⁶ For more on the technical workings of the military judicial system see, Simoens, ‘Belgian Military Justice’, pp. 183-202. For contrary views on the repressive nature of the army on the individual see, Debaeke, *De Dood met de Kogel*; and Maes, ‘Het Belgisch Militair Gerecht’, pp. 197-236.

effects that the stresses and chaos experienced during the war of movement could have in forcing the hand of the military authorities to keep order in the ranks.⁶⁴⁷

There is some evidence to suggest that the seven executions in 1914, and the subsequent three in May and July 1915, were partly motivated by a desire to create a deterrent. The well documented words of General De Ceuninck, when commanding 6DA in 1915, attest to this fact: ‘We are approaching the bad season, and life in the trenches will be difficult; already certain transgressions of the mind are manifesting themselves; it is imperative to curb this evil through a severe example. From this point of view, the results obtained in May have been very satisfying.’⁶⁴⁸ While the manner of the retreat provided opportunities to desert by blending into the fleeing throngs of refugees, only a minority attempted to take advantage.⁶⁴⁹ Indeed, many soldiers often found themselves inadvertently cut off from their units for a period of time that saw them pass before the military courts. However, to suggest that there was no leniency would be a gross misrepresentation. Prosecutors frequently attempted to find technicalities that would acquit the accused, while certain officers preferred to deal with matters internally without recourse to courts martial.⁶⁵⁰ Even the King, who was placed in a rather awkward position as Head of State and Commander in Chief, granted pardons to at least 19 men who had been sentenced to death between November 1914 and May 1915.⁶⁵¹ This demonstrated two things; firstly that the executions before the summer of 1915 were not done so arbitrarily, and secondly that the intensity with which they were carried out was higher in the opening months of the war as a result of the

⁶⁴⁷ Greenhalgh, *French Army*, p. 62.

⁶⁴⁸ S. Horvat, *De Vervolging*, p. 381.

⁶⁴⁹ For more on the details of each of the 12 execution cases see, Maes, ‘Belgisch Militair Gerecht’.

⁶⁵⁰ Simoens, ‘Belgian Military Justice’, pp. 189 & 192-193.

⁶⁵¹ S. Horvat, *Vervolging*, p. 380.

critical nature of the situation that necessitated the firm hand of authority to maintain the army's discipline.

With the passing of the immediate threat, however, the decision was taken in July 1915 to suspend the implementation of the death penalty for any crime other than murder; of which there were just two cases in 1918.⁶⁵² When it is considered that of the 365,000 men who passed through the Belgian army during the First World War, only 220 were sentenced to death, of which 12 were carried out, the coercive element to maintain morale was not, as David Englander suggested, disproportionately harsh to its French counterparts though perhaps more so to the Germans.⁶⁵³ The Belgian execution ratio proportionately to its manpower throughout the war measured 0.0033%, which sat between the more lenient German figure of 0.00036% and the severe 0.00741% of the French.⁶⁵⁴ Carrying out just 5.45% of its death sentences passed, actually compares rather favourably to the 10.82% of the British, the 32% of the Germans, the 35% of the French, and 72.47% of the Italians.⁶⁵⁵ Even allowing for variations in the size of their

⁶⁵² One was for the murder of an NCO in the 2nd Grenadiers, the other the murder of a civilian. For the latter see, B. Amez & X. Rousseaux, 'L'affaire Ferfaillie en 'Belgique Libre' (27 octobre 1917 – 26 mars 1918): Excès de la justice militaire, laboratoire de la justice scientifique ou instrument de l'affirmation nationale?', in Margo De Koster et al. (eds.), *Justice in Wartime and Revolutions: Europe, 1795-1950/Justice en temps de guerre et révolutions: Europe, 1795-1950* (Algemeen Rijksarchief, Brussels, 2012), pp. 135-161.

⁶⁵³ Englander, 'Mutinies', p. 192.

⁶⁵⁴ A. Watson, 'Morale', in J. Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War* (Vol. II, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014), p. 179.

⁶⁵⁵ For the British figures see T. Bowman, *Irish Regiments in the Great War, Discipline and Morale* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2003), p. 13; for the Italians see J. Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014), p. 363. The numbers for the French and Germans were calculated from figures in Englander, 'Mutinies', p. 192. For more on British discipline during the First World War see, J. Putkowski & J. Sykes, *Shot at Dawn* (Wharncliffe Publishing, Barnsley, 1989); A. Babington, *For the Sake of Example: Capital Courts Martial 1914-18 the Truth* (Leo Cooper, London, 1983); C. Corns & J. Hughes-Wilson, *Blindfold and Alone: British Military Executions in the Great War* (Cassell & Co, London, 2001); G. Oram, *Military Executions during World War I* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2003).

army, the Belgian soldier was relatively well protected. If anything, the intensity of executions during the 1914 campaign, both as a total of death sentences passed and with regard to the size of the army, might have placed Belgian soldiers at greater risk than their counterparts in other armies, but over the course of the war as a whole, and particularly after mid-1915, the risk of dying by capital punishment was greatly reduced.

Further studies have also shown that discipline during the First World War was comparable to the army's peacetime rates. It has been suggested that military courts sentenced approximately 2.24% of Belgian soldiers each year, which was substantially lower than the 3.6% average witnessed between 1900 and 1913.⁶⁵⁶ The most common crimes tried by courts martial were insubordination and desertion, which combined, accounted for 84.4% of cases tried between 1914 and 1919.⁶⁵⁷ While there are difficulties in establishing a precise yearly breakdown by offence, due to the delay in bringing some cases to court, it is clear that the substantial increase in sentences for insubordination and desertion reflected the general sense of war-weariness from 1916 onwards that similarly pervaded other armies.⁶⁵⁸ Notwithstanding, the claim that discipline was particularly harsh in the Belgian army based on such figures would be a mistake. Many cases were simply dealt with at regimental level and thus did not show up in the courts-martial records. This had the effect of somewhat skewing the figures

⁶⁵⁶ Simoens, 'Belgian Military Justice', p. 187; and J. Gilissen, 'La juridiction militaire Belge de 1830 à nos jours', in *Actes du Colloque d'Histoire Militaire Belge (1830-1980)/Akten van het Colloquium over de Belgische Krijgsgeschiedenis (1830-1980)* (26-28 March 1980) (Musée Royal de l'Armée, Brussels, 1981), p. 474.

⁶⁵⁷ Horvat, *Vervolging*, p. 131.

⁶⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133.

to show a disproportionate number of serious cases of insubordination and desertion whereas, in reality, discipline was relatively well maintained.⁶⁵⁹

In his work on the German and British armies, Watson viewed the good disciplinary records of both forces as ‘evidence of the efficacy of their coercive mechanisms.’⁶⁶⁰ This could equally be said of the Belgians, even during their more heavy-handed approach in 1914. More to the point, however, was the link he made between good discipline being a reflection of individual resilience, with as few as 4.58% of German soldiers and 5.70% of British soldiers receiving treatment for psychiatric illness during the war.⁶⁶¹ Between December 1914 and February 1918, some 2,374 Belgian soldiers were admitted to psychiatric institutions in France, translating to a comparable 6.5% of all men to pass through the army.⁶⁶² This would suggest that Belgian soldiers were not too dissimilar in this regard, managing to find ways to adapt to the intensely dislocating effects of disempowerment and deprivation, despite their poor reputation as a fighting force.

When it is considered that the vast majority of Belgian soldiers were equally forced to contend with the fact that their country was under occupation, the feat is all the more impressive. Not only was there a lack of reliable information coming from behind the lines but the Germans refused to allow the operation of a postal service between Belgian soldiers and their families. Indeed, the Spanish Government was even approached in 1916 to act as an intermediary in the establishment of a correspondence network, although it appeared as if the Germans deliberately stalled its progress in order

⁶⁵⁹ For more on disciplinary action at regimental level see, Simoens, ‘Belgian Military Justice’, pp. 192-193; and ‘Van arrangeren tot renseigneren. Smaad en geweld van militairen tegen hun oversten tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog’, *Cahiers d’Histoire du Temps présent*, no. 23 (2011), pp. 15-53.

⁶⁶⁰ Watson, *Enduring*, p. 43.

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶² Simoens, ‘Belgian Military Justice’, p. 195.

to ‘sow despondency’ in the Belgian ranks.⁶⁶³ This was all the more effective when rumours were spread about German atrocities and mass deportations of Belgian civilians as the sense of helplessness could become unbearable.

Special measures were taken to keep men as informed as possible about their families and local news. Through various sources, lists of births, deaths and marriages were collated and circulated on pre-designed request cards that could satisfy a soldier’s desire for news. More than 100,000 letters of thanks were received in two years for this initiative, showing that morale was above all sustained by a constant stream of news. An exemplar, written by Sergeant Alphonse Dantine on 15 November 1916, stated:

It was for me a joyous day that one which, through your intermediary, I received a little word from our dear country. Therefore, accept our thanks and know that the appreciation of the Belgian soldier will be eternal, because the good that you bring us is without compare. One word, one word only from home, is enough to give us the necessary courage to fulfil our duty, courage that might sometimes be missing as a result of such difficult circumstances in which we live.⁶⁶⁴

The establishment of the *Bureau de Correspondence* in Le Havre from as early as December 1914 facilitated the circulation of correspondence to and from the neutral states but not much more. Some men used this to write to pen-pals, known as ‘godmothers’, in French and Dutch speaking countries, with those from Canada said to have offered ‘apart from a few dollars, some excellent advice and comforting words.’⁶⁶⁵ Soldiers wishing to at least try and make contact with home were forced to pay independent agents and smugglers whose success was not guaranteed. However,

⁶⁶³ AGR, POS. 1510/90-540, Beyens to de Broqueville, 23 September 1916.

⁶⁶⁴ MRA, EX CDH 3768, Cabinet: Organisation of the *Sûreté Militaire Belge*, 1918.

⁶⁶⁵ AGR, POS. 1510/90-540, Doorloost(?) to de Broqueville, 19 March 1917.

increasingly stringent controls (for censorship purposes) firstly limited men to a maximum of three letters of no more than two pages per week (1915) and subsequently obliged them to use one of the official GQG or Ministry of War-recognised agencies and intermediaries (1917).⁶⁶⁶

Although the lack of news could heighten anxiety, it also proved to be a source of great determination. A morale report from the *Censure Militaire Belge* in Folkestone in 1916 suggested that:

morale remains excellent. Despite dashed hopes, the estrangement, the absence of regular news from their families left in the country, the mass deportations in operation in Belgium, the failures of the Rumanian troops which disconcerts them, in spite of the third winter to endure, Belgian soldiers have not for one instant ceased to believe in the possibility of seeing the war end in the current state of the military situation. No-one appeals for peace, all aspire to fight. They are, despite everything, confident in the final victory. Following their favourite expression, “they will hold”. We all have a quite clear impression that a suspension of hostilities in the current state of affairs will provoke an explosion of anger and perhaps violence. Each soldier lives only for vengeance and this, given the opportunity, will be terrible and ferocious.⁶⁶⁷

This reveals one of the single most important factors in understanding how an army on the strategic and operational defensive for the best part of four years was able to endure a war in which its suffering was exacerbated by the difficulties of the occupation of

⁶⁶⁶ R. Christens & K. De Clerq, *Frontleven 14/18. Het Dagelijkse leven van de Belgische soldaat aan de Ijzer* (Lannoo, Tirlemont, 1987), pp. 104-105.

⁶⁶⁷ AGR, POS. 1510/90-540, Commandant de la Sûreté Militaire to de Broqueville, 7 December 1916.

their homeland. The desire sustained Belgian soldiers, who hoped for nothing more than the opportunity to exact revenge.

Additional news of atrocities only reinforced the desire to see the job through, as documented by Sergeant Denis Jacquemin of the 9th Line Infantry Regiment in response to news of the burning of Latour and the murder of 70 of its inhabitants:

Yes, it is for us soldiers, the sons of these unfortunate victims, the best, the most efficient of all the stimulants. The reports of the suffering, stoically endured by our parents, [...] have the effect of making us hate to the extreme the common enemy. [...] It must not be forgotten that it is the lack of news of those we love that demoralises the soldier and not the privations of war.⁶⁶⁸

Whilst Jacquemin may have exaggerated or falsely generalised about materiel hardships, the powerful emotions of hatred and resentment aroused by the occupation cannot be underestimated. It was the driving force that no other army could count on to the same degree. Clearly the French army was motivated by revenge for 1870 and the reclaiming of its lost provinces, and the British found a powerful propaganda tool in embellishing the threat of invasion, but the realities of the situation confronting Belgian troops made fuelling this animosity essential to their success because to have removed the hope of retribution would have been akin to sapping their last vestiges of energy and desire for the fight.⁶⁶⁹

The other immediate effect of the occupation on the unique war experience of Belgian soldiers was their inability to return home on leave. Rest, recuperation and

⁶⁶⁸ MRA, EX CDH 3768, Cabinet: Organisation of the *Sûreté Militaire Belge*, 1918; for more on German atrocities in Belgium see, Horne & Kramer, *German atrocities, 1914*; and J. Horne, 'Atrocities and war crimes' in J. Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War* (Vol. I, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014), pp. 569-570 & 573-576.

⁶⁶⁹ Greenhalgh, *French Army*, p. xi.

distancing oneself from the front, especially in the company of loved ones, was an important factor in sustaining morale as it gave soldiers something to look forward to. However, the infrequency could have adverse effects. On average, German soldiers were released from the army only once a year, whilst British soldiers could only count on ten days leave or, after November 1917, two weeks, every fifteen months.⁶⁷⁰ The Belgian army was not too dissimilar. Each man was theoretically allowed a period of ten days leave each year, not including the journey time. The problem was the want of anywhere to go. As with British Colonial and Dominion forces, the pressures of facing up to how long a non-professional army could be expected to serve, in their case overseas, without leave to go home were a pressing concern and perhaps the only analogous case to the Belgian soldier's plight.⁶⁷¹ France and Britain offered alternatives to the majority of Belgian soldiers whose families were not in the unoccupied portion of the country, but financial restrictions on account of the expense of travel proved a limiting factor. This was particularly the case in the early years of the war when pay was low. Combined with the intensity of the campaign the opportunities of going on leave were rare until the army had re-established itself sufficiently and adapted to the nature of modern war.

Figure. 6.1. demonstrates the evolving trend of leave between 1915 and 1917 that saw increasing numbers of men benefit from a more accessible and equitable system. Whereas significant numbers of soldiers were unable to enjoy even a single period of leave in 1915, their number reduced as the war progressed. Instead, Belgian

⁶⁷⁰ Watson, *Enduring*, p. 101.

⁶⁷¹ The Australians did not manage to send a draft home until September 1918. See, F.W. Perry, *The Commonwealth armies: Manpower and organisation in two world wars* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1988), pp. 158 & 222-223.

troops were increasingly assured one, if not two, separate periods of leave during the year to better withstand the pressures of war-weariness. This was made progressively

Figure. 6.1. Leave of troops, 1915-1917.⁶⁷²

<i>No of leave periods granted per year</i>	<i>1915</i>	<i>1916</i>	<i>1917</i>
<i>0</i>	71,337	38,859	23,106
<i>1</i>	23,765	46,518	50,926
<i>2</i>	11,825	31,856	53,412
<i>3</i>	2,062	12,911	12,606
<i>4</i>	122	1,213	497
<i>5</i>	36	108	114
<i>6</i>	34	38	39
<i>7+</i>	28	42	28

more possible when the meagre pay of just 33 *centimes* per day (supplemented by a further 15, 20 and 40 *centimes* for private soldiers, corporals and senior NCOs respectively) was raised, following the French chevron system, to reward time spent on the frontlines as well as a ‘combat indemnity’ between one and five francs. Even so, some soldiers still struggled to meet the costs, prompting the King to fund up to 300 soldiers per month to sojourn in rest camps or civilian accommodation behind the lines.⁶⁷³ Personal touches like these went a long way to maintaining the affection for

⁶⁷² AGR, POS. 1510/90-540, Undated tables regarding leave of troops in de Broqueville Papers (probably 1918).

⁶⁷³ MRA, EX CDH 4362, General appraisal of the principal measures taken to improve the well-being, materiel and morale of the Belgian soldiers. Campaign 1914-1918. Written by the General Staff of the Army, 1918.

the monarchy and its image as the protector of the nation. Despite their best efforts, though, some 12,694 men had still not obtained a single period of leave by the end of 1917 as a result of a combination of circumstances, including the financial strain. However, it is worth noting that some were also said to have refused it as a matter of principle, preferring to remain in the line.⁶⁷⁴

Money was important to the average soldier to help ease the stresses of trench life through the purchasing of small comforts. The scarcity of food, which was brought up to the frontline just once in every 24 hours, was the cause of much distress while the over-reliance on rice and beans became increasingly monotonous.⁶⁷⁵ On the rare occasion when the *Intendance* obtained alternatives, such as a consignment of salted herring, it was distributed to the men with such frequency that it caused widespread nausea. The new *Ministre d'Intendance Civile et Militaire*, Émile Vandervelde (the leader of the Socialist party and the first socialist to obtain a Cabinet post under the wartime coalition), found that upon touring the trenches nine out of ten soldiers would refer to him as the '*Ministre des harengs salés*' despite his protestations that the fault lay elsewhere.⁶⁷⁶ Moreover, the water brought up to the front frequently tasted of chlorine that could detrimentally affect the flavour of coffee with the effect of lowering morale.⁶⁷⁷ As a result, Belgian soldiers craved the luxuries only offered by independent vendors who, knowing the scarcity of food, charged extortionate prices. From mid-1915, however, military shops were established to provide men with their desired goods

⁶⁷⁴ AGR, POS. 1510/90-540, Undated tables regarding leave of troops in de Broqueville Papers (probably 1918).

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid., Commandant de la Sûreté Militaire to De Broqueville, 19 June 1917. Morale Report.

⁶⁷⁶ E. Vandervelde, *Souvenirs d'un militant socialiste* (Les Éditions Denoël, Paris, 1939), p. 210.

⁶⁷⁷ MRA, Fonds 1DA, 1351/66 – Report on the state of troops from the point of view of morale and materiel, 29 July 1918.

without being fleeced for the privilege. Two officer shops, offering a wider range of more lavish products soon followed. The Belgian army even established its own brewery after it was found that locally-brewed beer in the unoccupied part of Belgium contained ‘*bacillus coli*’ from un-purified water that was making men sick.⁶⁷⁸ The effort by the military authorities to make supplementary items more accessible and safer is a clear recognition of their importance to soldiers’ physical and mental wellbeing. Yet, despite obtaining relatively successful results, supply could never outweigh demand and the cost still proved high for many.

An alternative source of home comforts came by way of charity and in particular the Gifts for Belgian Soldiers initiative. From as early as 16 December 1914 when Vandervelde, then Minister of State, wrote an open letter on behalf of the Allies’ Relief Committee, appeals were made to the British people to donate by subscription money and goods to be shipped to the Belgian front. *The Times* called for as many as one million gifts; in particular ‘promises of a gift of food once a week’ were welcomed.⁶⁷⁹ Emotive tales of ‘the heroes of Liège’ suffering through winter tallied well with propagandist rhetoric of ‘gallant little Belgium’ and the sight of thousands of refugees across the country, to produce an empathetic reaction.⁶⁸⁰ Indeed, by Christmas 1915, the Nottinghamshire Fund Committee alone appealed to supporters to surpass their 1914 total of 6,400 boxes, each containing ½ lb of chocolate and 80 cigarettes.⁶⁸¹ Similarly, a sum of 8,000 francs, from a Gifts for Belgian Soldiers fund recently arrived at GQG in August 1915, had the stipulation of being distributed to those with the least

⁶⁷⁸ MRA, EX CDH 4362, General appraisal of the principal measures taken to improve the well-being, materiel and morale of the Belgian soldiers. Campaign 1914-1918. Written by the General Staff of the Army, 1918.

⁶⁷⁹ *The Times*, 22 December 1914.

⁶⁸⁰ Pennell, *United Kingdom*, pp. 127-129.

⁶⁸¹ Nottinghamshire Fund Committee, *Xmas gifts for Belgian soldiers at the front* (Nottingham, 1915).

personal means to procure the small comforts required to ease their existence.⁶⁸² These small donations had a great moral effect on the individual beneficiaries and the army at large, particularly at Christmas when the estrangement from family and friends was at its most poignant. Despite not being able to match the American Red Cross offer of \$1,000,000 to be spent within the first month in order to strike ‘an immediate impression [...] to show the Belgian soldiers that the US competition, was as usual, the biggest in the world’, it was the first initiative of its kind and begun at a critical moment when the army required assistance following the Yser campaign.⁶⁸³

After the army had re-established itself, and the static nature of the war appeared firmly set in, the most prized gifts of all were those of a recreational nature. The sheer length of the war lent itself to men adopting a fatalistic attitude which, if not distracted from, could produce negative psychological effects leading to a disregard for safety and personal well-being.⁶⁸⁴ With great support from the Queen, books of all sorts were sent from neutral countries to fill the shelves of the rolling libraries that toured the front. Soldiers were given the opportunity of selecting one book each month that would then circulate through the company and subsequently between units. Close to 250,000 were sent to the front over the course of the war, the majority of them in French, offering a truly impressive range. Vandervelde commented after the war how very Belgian it was to see that the most popular books were actually of a technical nature, noting that ‘In the trenches, men were already thinking of a career after the war.’⁶⁸⁵ This was

⁶⁸² MRA, Fonds 1DA, 228/1, Note by A. Kenon, 8 August 1915.

⁶⁸³ The American Red Cross contribution totaled more than 7 million dollars by war’s end. See Vandervelde, *Souvenirs*, pp. 211-212.

⁶⁸⁴ Watson, *Enduring*, pp. 87-89.

⁶⁸⁵ Vandervelde, *Souvenirs*, pp. 212-213.

highlighted by the fact that complaints were often lodged when there was a dearth of intellectual distraction, particularly in terms of books and discussions.⁶⁸⁶

Education had always been an important, though divisive issue, in Belgium and great efforts were made to improve the army's institutionalised regimental schooling for illiterates during the war. Many young men felt that they had had their secondary, higher or professional education interrupted to answer the nation's call in 1914 and had a right to demand a continuation of their tuition whilst under arms.⁶⁸⁷ In a manner akin to that of the nineteenth century, the unwritten social contract of education for military service was again drawn upon to keep the relationship between State and individual in working order. Initially, a single division offered a range of classes across both the humanities and the sciences before it was extended to all divisions following its popularity and success. The *humanités anciennes* were composed of Latin, Greek, French, Flemish, English, German, History, Geography, mathematics and natural sciences. The *humanités modernes* were split into two sections: sciences, and commercial and industrial studies. The main problem facing the authorities was finding qualified personnel to teach them. Such was the importance of the initiative that the army was combed for men whose pre-war positions lent themselves to teaching. While 29 academic doctors, 67 secondary school, and 1,789 primary school teachers were found through an examination of the available records, there were many more private instructors of which they knew nothing.⁶⁸⁸ Notwithstanding, the level of education was deemed satisfactory enough for the government to declare all degrees and qualifications

⁶⁸⁶ MRA, CDH, Fonds GQG II Section, 118, Report on the morale of troops for the period 25 October 1917 – 25 November 1917.

⁶⁸⁷ MRA, EX CDH 4362, General appraisal of the principal measures taken to improve the well-being, materiel and morale of the Belgian soldiers. Campaign 1914-1918. Written by the General Staff of the Army, 1918.

⁶⁸⁸ AGR, POS. 1510/90-540, Poulet to de Broqueville, 18 September 1918.

obtained whilst in the army valid so as to ease the transition back into civilian life post-war. This was more than could be said of the degrees issued by the newly proclaimed Flemish University of Gent (reopened on 24 October 1916 as part of Germany's *Flamenpolitik* policy), which were to be invalidated after the allied victory.⁶⁸⁹

More light-hearted, though no less important, was the supply of sporting equipment. The Gifts for Belgian Soldiers campaign was particularly prominent in providing footballs and boots to the front, recognising the long-standing culture in the British army of using physical recreation to boost morale.⁶⁹⁰ Sport had begun to play a larger role in the Belgian army as 1914 approached, with each regiment forming its own teams of footballers, gymnasts and runners to compete in military tournaments. However, it took some time to convince senior military officials of its value, as many believed it would cause unnecessary fatigue and injuries. Some junior officers were more forthcoming and attempted to establish sporting initiatives as soon as the war of movement had ended. The benefits of having Flemings play alongside Walloons and officers alongside their men, all vying to achieve supremacy for their unit, were clear for all to see.⁶⁹¹ The argument in favour of it was simple; war was a big sporting event that had to be won. Much as in peacetime where every effort was made to vanquish one's opponent to the better of one's cause, war too was played by the same principles. This was exemplified in the sporting trench newspaper, *L'Echo Sportif*, which wrote,

⁶⁸⁹ For an overview of *Flamenpolitik* in occupied Belgium see, L. Wils, *Flamenpolitik en Aktivisme: vlaanderen tegenover belgië in de eerste wereldoorlog* (Davidsfonds, Leuven, 1974).

⁶⁹⁰ T. Mason & E. Riedi, *Sport and the Military: The British Armed Forces 1880-1960* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010), pp. 80-111; J.G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and popular culture in the British and Dominion armies, 1914-1918* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1990), pp. 85-94; French, *Military Identities*, pp. 118-119; and J.D. Campbell, *'The Army Isn't All Work': Physical Culture and the Evolution of the British Army, 1860-1920* (Ashgate, Farnham, 2012).

⁶⁹¹ *L'Independence Belge*, 14 November 1917.

‘[t]o be a good soldier, one must be a good sportsman. It is a beautiful truth, which our soldiers and officers understand.’⁶⁹² Nevertheless, it took until late 1916 for the Minister of War to acknowledge the positive effects that sport might have by finally sanctioning the football and cross-country Military Championships to be reinstated at the front.⁶⁹³

King Albert, on the other hand, was a great proponent of such initiatives. He personally paid for the purchase of sporting equipment and, along with Queen Elisabeth, frequently attended matches to present prizes to the victors. On one occasion, these included five specially commissioned Swiss watches made from the metal of a Belgian 75mm gun, complete with gold trimmings, inscription and accompanying certificate of authenticity. Only 5,000 were made and were generally reserved for men who had distinguished themselves on the battlefield.⁶⁹⁴ They recognised, more than others, the unifying effects of team-sports and the benefit such patronage could bring. Simultaneously, the added benefits of maintaining physical fitness through blowing off steam in the intense environment of the front were difficult to ignore.

From a strictly military point of view, however, sport was not seen as having the martial discipline or effectiveness of routine drill, marches and fatigues. Many officers preferred tried and tested methods to keep their men in shape and distracted while out of the line. In his Order of the Day for 26 October 1915, for example, General Wielemans expressed his desire to see the army sharpen up its attitude towards military values, which he felt were severely lacking in comparison to other armies. He intended to place renewed emphasis on closed-rank exercises in order to foster a passive

⁶⁹² MRA, At-14-XI-4 BOX 5, *L’Echo Sportif*, 15 October 1916.

⁶⁹³ *Ibid.*, 10 December 1916.

⁶⁹⁴ MRA, At-14-XI-4 BOX 1, *Les bonnes nouvelles/Het goede nieuws*, September 1918. See also, Christens & De Clerq, *Frontleven*, pp. 117-120.

obedience to orders, increase the frequency of route marches, and inculcate respect by obliging soldiers to always salute officers unless they were in the front line.⁶⁹⁵ Such measures appeared unnecessary to the majority of troops who were still acclimatising to a prolonged period of military service. It was the source of much discontent in correspondence purely on account of its futility and tiring nature during what were supposed to be periods of rest and recuperation.⁶⁹⁶

As much as inequality in rations between ordinary soldiers and officers in the German army eroded the relationship superiors had with their men, so did unwarranted exercises among the Belgians.⁶⁹⁷ The officer-man relationship, which proved so important in the maintenance of British morale, had for a long time been undermined in the Belgian military milieu by the perceived social and linguistic issues blocking the development of paternalism.⁶⁹⁸ Yet, contempt was similarly expressed with regard to NCOs, whose constant presence alongside the men was disliked on account of their precise, often-unwavering application of the letter of the law. The realist painter, Maurice Wagemans (1877-1927), wrote of his experience in the trenches to his friend and colleague Emile Claus in 1916, in which he describes the self-importance displayed by his superiors:

I beg your pardon for not having already written to you. It is not, I assure you, for want of thought, but I suffer so much here that I would have told you but sad things only. It is a difficult apprenticeship, that of a soldier, and I will

⁶⁹⁵ MRA, Fonds 1DA, 309/16, Annex to O.J.A. by Wielemans, 26 October 1915.

⁶⁹⁶ AGR, POS. 1510/90-540, Commandant de la Sûreté Militaire to de Broqueville, 19 June 1917.

⁶⁹⁷ H. Strachan, 'The Morale of the German Army, 1917-18', in *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced* (Leo Cooper, London, 1996), p. 391.

⁶⁹⁸ See G. Sheffield, 'Officer-Man Relations, Discipline and Morale in the British Army of the Great War', in *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced* (Leo Cooper, London, 1996), pp. 413-424.

not hide from you that it requires of me immense courage and will in order to endure. Here, one must completely forget one's being, the absolute sacrifice of one's individuality, because we are treated as pariahs by NCOs drunk with vulgarity. They are masters of the house. The commanders, the officers, turn a blind eye and seem very indifferent to everything that goes on.⁶⁹⁹

He continued by claiming that endless fatigues that saw him up from 05.30 until 18.00 each day completed their misery and that it was all conducted under 'a reign of terror.'⁷⁰⁰

Moreover, soldiers returning to Belgian lines from German prisoner of war (POW) camps were similarly shocked by the reception they received. Upon reaching the Belgian camp of Auvours in Northern France, one man, who escaped from Germany at the fourth attempt, wrote:

I am happy to have got out, despite on the other hand regretting it at times. We think, when we are there, that we will be well received here by our compatriots; but no, it is rare to even get a hello, especially by the commanders, who tell us that we have to return to the front, which will be dangerous for us, as the Boches have our photographs and all the necessary information. If we were to be recaptured, we would be placed up against the wall. [...] Yes, in the camps over there, they told us that escapees were not well received in the Belgian army; I did not want to believe it, but now I am certain.⁷⁰¹

The frequency with which such reports reached de Broqueville was alarming to say the least. Not only did it have negative effects on the morale of those men who had made the arduous journey across occupied territories to do their duty, but equally gave further

⁶⁹⁹ AGR, POS. 1510/90-540, Wagemans to Claus, 1 January 1916.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid., Barreley to Van der Essen, 15 September 1917.

credence to the activist propaganda being disseminated in German camps. Some of them, such as Göttingen, were purposefully turned into politicising institutions where German sympathisers were gathered and imbued with *Flamenpolitik* to be disseminated among their comrades.⁷⁰² The fear that the Germans might deliberately release Belgian activists to re-join the army was a worrying thought and not entirely unfounded. Their effect may have been limited, but in conjunction with German placards raised above the parapets bearing pictures of Belgian deserters with their families, it was no wonder that the authorities feared some Flemish soldiers might begin to question who exactly had their best interests at heart.⁷⁰³

The Flemish question during the First World War has long been a source of historiographical debate. From the initial claims made by Raf Verhulst in 1917 that 80% of Belgian casualties in the war were Flemish, the idea that they were deliberately sacrificed by Walloon officers has become ingrained in the public consciousness. The proportion of Flemish soldiers in the army has proven difficult to accurately establish. Hans Keymulen and Luc De Vos have suggested that the split was roughly 69/31 in favour of the Flemish over the course of the war, with increasing parity in the technical arms.⁷⁰⁴ Sophie de Schaepdrijver estimated it at around 65/35, while later figures by De Vos and Holmes intimated that there were as few as 59% Flemings in 1914; only marginally higher than their share of the population.⁷⁰⁵ These figures appear well

⁷⁰² For more on Belgian POWs in Germany see, R. Pöppinghege, 'Belgian Life behind German Barbed Wire', in Serge Jaumain (et.al.) (ed.), *Une Guerre Totale? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre Mondiale: Nouvelles Tendances de la Recherche Historique. Actes du colloque international organisé à l'ULB du 15 au 17 janvier 2003* (Algemeen Rijksarchief – Archives générales du Royaume, Brussels, 2005), pp. 207-220.

⁷⁰³ MRA, EX CDH 3768, Report by Hymans for the Council of Ministers, 6 July 1918.

⁷⁰⁴ See Keymeulen & De Vos: 'Een Definitieve Afrekening', vol. 27, no. 8 (1988), pp. 589-612; vol. 28, no. 1 (1989), pp. 1-37; vol. 28, no.2, pp. 81-104.

⁷⁰⁵ De Schaepdrijver, *Groote Oorlog*, p. 189; and L. De Vos & R. Holmes, *Langs velden van eer: belangrijke plaatsen in de Eerste en de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Davidsfonds, Leuven, 2006), p. 50.

founded, despite the minor variables, as the recruitment processes in place in the fifteen years preceding 1914 would have lent itself to a mildly higher proportion of Flemings joining through replacement and voluntary means. Similarly, the increase to approximately 65% of Flemings should come as no surprise. It must be remembered that the entirety of Wallonia was occupied from September 1914 until the armistice. The only unoccupied spit of land defended by the Belgians was in Flanders, offering a small pool of manpower of almost exclusively Flemish speakers from which to draw. This is corroborated by Henri Bernard's figures that show the proportion of Flemish soldiers rising from 53% in 1914 to 63% by 1918.⁷⁰⁶

The promulgation of the idea that disproportionately high Flemish casualties were sustained has quite naturally proved a contentious point and a battleground for post-war separatist claims. Attempts by the likes of F.E. Stevens and Luc Schepens to revise the 80% myth have only further obfuscated the debate through inconsistent and fundamentally flawed methodology. The former's sample was constructed solely around one regiment that was predominantly recruited in Brussels, while the latter based his findings on the records of ten cemeteries in Flanders that failed to take into account the most costly battles in Antwerp and Liège or the fact that many Walloon soldiers were exhumed after the war and reburied locally.⁷⁰⁷ Schepens' estimation that approximately 67.94% of casualties were Flemish still appeared a gross over-estimation to Keymulen and De Vos whose methodological integrity steered them towards a suggestion of no more than 59.28%.⁷⁰⁸ The idea that the Flemish-dominated infantry were used as cannon-fodder was dispelled by their extrapolation of data from the

⁷⁰⁶ H. Bernard, *L'an 14 et la campagne des illusions* (La Renaissance de Livre, Brussels, 1982), p. 56.

⁷⁰⁷ F.E. Stevens: 'De Samenstelling', pp. 681-722.

⁷⁰⁸ L. Schepens, *Albert Ier et le gouvernement Broqueville 1914-1918* (Duculot, Paris-Gembloux, 1983), p. 58; and Keymeulen & De Vos, 'Definitieve', vol 28. no.2, p. 97.

official casualties list published by the *Moniteur Belge*. They argued that the army as a whole, without taking into account the place of death, saw a casualty rate of 64.31% Flemish and 35.69% Walloon. Alternatively, a more precise calculation based on the fighting army alone whose deaths were recorded in Belgium, France or Britain, demonstrated that only 54.9% were Flemish, 26.6% Walloon and 9.9% bilingual. Furthermore, their figures for 1915-1918 highlighted the 'Flemishisation' of the Yser army by contending that 68.81% of men who died in Flanders were of Flemish origin compared to 31.19% Walloon.⁷⁰⁹ This may well have given the impression that an above-average number of Flemings were being killed during the war but in reality the ratio was in line with their proportion of the army.

How the Flemish question impacted on the effectiveness and workings of the army during the war itself is a different matter altogether. For decades there had been an assumption that Flemish soldiers had been discriminated against by their Walloon superiors on account of the language barrier. These injustices had been recognised and were in the process of being modified by an equality of language law due to come into effect in 1917. As with many other aspects of Belgian military organisation, the outbreak of war interrupted the process and seemingly created an unsavoury situation whereby command and control would be compromised by misunderstanding and continued officer-man friction. Yet recent scholarship has shown that this was not at all the case and certainly did not lead to the same problems of desertion and ineffectiveness as seen with Czech or Ruthene troops in the Austro-Hungarian army.⁷¹⁰ Through life in the trenches and time spent in French rest camps and hospitals, Flemish soldiers picked up a rudimentary understanding of the language. Indeed, French military expressions

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 96.

⁷¹⁰ N. Stone, *The Eastern Front, 1914-1917* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1985), pp. 126-127.

formed a veritable *lingua franca* of the army.⁷¹¹ Moreover, the majority of NCOs, who often adopted leadership roles during combat, were bilingual and would repeat the order in both French and Flemish to avoid confusion. Only one example, in Horvat's study of courts-martial records, revealed a Flemish soldier's claim to not have understood the orders given to him in French.⁷¹²

Of course, this is not to say that there was no desire among Flemish soldiers to be commanded in their own language. It has been suggested that demands were made to this end from as early as December 1915.⁷¹³ However, these were sporadic and individualistic in nature and as such engendered little reaction. More concerted efforts in 1917 involving organised campaigns with Flemish slogans repeated throughout the army were much more powerful. Censors found increasing references to linguistic matters in private correspondence, while open letters expressing grievances appeared with greater frequency.⁷¹⁴ One such letter, addressed to the King on 11 July 1917, asked for the establishment of separate Flemish and Walloon armies alongside a Flemish government seated in Flanders.⁷¹⁵ These demands uncomfortably resembled processes being undertaken in occupied Belgium, which saw the administrative separation of the country take place on 21 March 1917 and the recognition of the *Raad van Vlanderen* (The Flemish Council) by the Germans on 15 February 1918. Yet the military authorities had to be particularly sensitive to the difference between loyal *Flamingants* campaigning for Flemish rights within a unified Belgium and Germanophile activists

⁷¹¹ De Schaepdrijver, *Groote Oorlog*, p. 183.

⁷¹² Horvat, *Vervolging*, p. 55.

⁷¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

⁷¹⁴ MRA, CDH – 118 Fonds GQG II Section, Report on the morale of troops for the period 25 July 1917 – 25 August 1917.

⁷¹⁵ Horvat, *Vervolging*, p. 58. For a full transcription see, T. Hermans (et.al.) (ed.), *The Flemish Movement: A Documentary History 1780-1990*, (Athlone Press Ltd, London, 1992), pp. 227-237.

seeking post-war political separation. This was of the highest importance to the government who were eager to ensure that no such confusion was made through the press or idle talk.⁷¹⁶ It was important to note that some leading *Flamingant* intellectuals had refused to collaborate in occupied Belgium, demonstrating a loyalty to the concept of a wider Belgian identity and reinforcing the notion that not all activists ought to be tarnished with the same brush.⁷¹⁷ To highlight this fact, intellectuals such as Camille de Bruyns, Paul Frédériquem and Louis Franck could all be found in German prisons having branded themselves anti-aktivists, with a ‘k’ to discriminate between their pre-war ideals and that of the pan-Germanism that was now in force in occupied territory.⁷¹⁸

On 4 August 1917, Armand De Ceuninck was appointed the new Minister of War to curb the unrest in the army. He instituted a series of measures to ensure that officers were appointed from both regions. De Ceuninck himself spoke good Flemish and used it in speeches to the troops. By 15 September 1917, De Ceuninck acknowledged the right of Flemish soldiers to demand that their superiors spoke Flemish, and encouraged all officers to learn the language. However, he also warned that the army could now no longer tolerate a political agenda. Propagandists were treated as accomplices of the German oppressor and dealt with accordingly through being distanced from the front by imprisonment or labour intensive work with the

⁷¹⁶ AGR, POS 1510/82 – 485, de Broqueville to Marsily, August 1917. Precise date unknown.

⁷¹⁷ For more on the intellectual response to the invasion see, H. Pirenne, *Belgium and the First World War* translated by Vincent Capelle and Jeff Lipkes (The Brabant Press, 2014), p. 204; and J. Horne, ‘Belgian intellectuals and the German invasion, 1914-1915’, in Serge Jaumain (et.al.) (ed.), *Une Guerre Totale? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre Mondiale: Nouvelles Tendances de la Recherche Historique. Actes du colloque international organisé à l’ULB du 15 au 17 janvier 2003* (Algemeen Rijksarchief – Archives générales du Royaume, Brussels, 2005), pp. 391-404.

⁷¹⁸ *L’Indépendance Belge*, 24 May 1918.

disciplinary companies.⁷¹⁹ Notwithstanding, change was slow as officers failed or refused to adapt. Much like the pre-war attempts to foster closer links with their men, officers were at a loss as to which Flemish to learn. Even Flemish intellectuals struggled with their fellow Flemings in the ranks, whose regional dialects were so diverse and different from the standardised language as to make communication impossible. As such, many rest camps and hospitals retained everything in French or adopted English as an operative language.⁷²⁰

In some cases, there was even a Walloon backlash. Many rankers were frustrated at the attention given to the *Flamingants* and angered at the prospect of being forced to learn Flemish; a language considered useless outside of Flanders.⁷²¹ In a conflict that largely saw Flemings and Walloons set aside their differences and regional affiliations for the good of the nation, the agitation in 1917 and 1918 was a timely reminder that local identities remained paramount in the understanding of ‘Belgianness’. Trench newspapers were a good example of this. They appear to have been specifically designed to nurture and reinforce the much-cherished connection between the individual and his locality by targeting readers from a given area. For example, the *Amons nos autes* newspaper printed stories about Liège and deeds of various *Liègeois* in the army in order to enable men to reconnect with their roots and their comrades spread across the various regiments. More importantly, in the context of the linguistic question, it even ran writing competitions in the Walloon dialect as

⁷¹⁹ B. Amez, ‘Maintenir ou éloigner du front? Le dilemme des autorités militaires belges face aux délinquants militaires au cours de la guerre 14-18: le cas des compagnies spéciales’, in Margo De Koster et al. (eds.), *Justice in Wartime and Revolutions: Europe, 1795-1950/Justice en temps de guerre et révolutions: Europe, 1795-1950* (Algemeen Rijksarchief, Brussels, 2012), pp. 117-134.

⁷²⁰ Horvat, *Vervolging*, p. 59.

⁷²¹ MRA, CDH – 118 Fonds GQG II Section, Reports on the morale of troops for the period 25 October 1917 – 25 November 1917; and 25 August 1918 – 25 September 1918.

opposed to French to show the *Liègeois* attachment to ‘*la petite patrie*’.⁷²² Having been established in October 1915, the newspaper reported in just its sixteenth issue on 15 May 1916 that it had surpassed 2,000 subscriptions; boldly claiming to have become the leading newspaper for the majority of the *Liègeois* in the army.⁷²³

Each locality could boast their own publication, though more general trench newspapers, appealing to a wider audience through bilingual editions were also available. In many cases military chaplains were heavily involved on the editorial boards ensuring a highbrow approach reflected in some officer-edited French or officially-sanctioned German examples but noticeably distinct from the troop-led smut often found in rankers’ publications.⁷²⁴ This saw a heavy influence of religious content, which before the war may have caused annoyance among some. However, belief in divine provenance had risen substantially in the army since 1914, requiring an expansion in the number of military chaplains from 53 to a grand total of 572 by war’s end.⁷²⁵ This even included 11 Protestant chaplains, under the direction of Pierre Blommaert, supporting the needs of a minority 3,000 men in the Belgian army.⁷²⁶ Although it is difficult to quantify the number of men who practised their faith during the war or for what purpose, it is highly likely that faith helped even those with the most minimal convictions to endure the war. As in other armies, the importance of carrying objects believed to possess supernatural powers of safety and deliverance, be it bibles, amulets or even letters and pictures from home, ‘returned responsibility for personal fate to the individual, negating the damaging feelings of disempowerment arising from

⁷²² MRA, At-14-XI-4 BOX 1, *Amon nos autes*, no. 24, 15 September 1916.

⁷²³ *Ibid.*, no. 16, 15 May 1916.

⁷²⁴ S. Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War, 1914-1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War* (Berg, Oxford & Washington D.C., 1992), pp. 3 & 9-10; and Fuller, *Troop Morale*, p. 14.

⁷²⁵ Leconte, *Aumôniers*, p. 88.

⁷²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

the front's objective uncontrollability.⁷²⁷ By carrying these items or praying during combat, soldiers felt that their fate lay in their own hands; that, should they forget, death or dismemberment was a likely outcome of their own doing. As such, the value of chaplains at the centre of the battalion was critical for the Belgian army. By accompanying men into battle and being an ever present in their lives, they assumed a great moral prestige that helped make them a 'precious auxiliary to authority.'⁷²⁸

The respect they commanded from the men through their presence and aid in recreational activities also placed chaplains at the forefront of Flemish activism. Suspicions concerning their involvement (which included stretcher-bearers) were particularly rife given their ability to hold seemingly innocent congregations of attentive audiences; the majority of which were composed of Flemish Catholics.⁷²⁹ J.R. Leconte argued that these were false accusations made in the post-war years based exclusively on information garnered from *Le XXe Siècle*, which had performed an uninterrupted campaign against the influence of chaplains since 1916 and should therefore be disregarded.⁷³⁰ While it certainly cannot be claimed that all chaplains were activists, the likes of Cyriel Verschave's authorship and distribution of the *Flemish Nationalist's Catechism* in March 1918 was a clear indication of direct involvement. In a question and answer format, this pamphlet set out radical aims for the Flemish people to take back what the Belgian political system had denied them.⁷³¹ Official reports, too, placed intellectuals and educated men (among which chaplains could be counted) at the

⁷²⁷ Watson, *Enduring*, p. 99.

⁷²⁸ MRA, EX CDH 4362, General appraisal of the principal measures taken to improve the well-being, materiel and morale of the Belgian soldiers. Campaign 1914-1918. Written by the General Staff of the Army, 1918.

⁷²⁹ MRA, CDH – 118 Fonds GQG II Section, Report on the morale of troops for the period 25 August 1917 – 25 September 1917.

⁷³⁰ Leconte, *Aumôniers*, pp. 80-81.

⁷³¹ Hermans, *Flemish Movement*, pp. 240-253.

centre of the agitation.⁷³² King Albert, himself, recognised this fact when he wrote, ‘This movement is supported by a propaganda systematically organised by numerous intellectuals.’⁷³³ Similarly, reports from soldiers on leave claimed that chaplains were without question the greatest proponents of *Flamingantism*, circulating the trenches saying ‘Speek vlaamsch’ (speak Flemish) in an aggressive manner.⁷³⁴ Their influence in the writing and distribution of seditious material was of paramount importance in changing the nature and scale of the agitation from local disturbances to an army-wide campaign.

The impact of reading material was particularly feared for its ability to question the reasons for which the Entente Powers were fighting. Articles concerning Ireland in *Ons Vaderland*, published in Calais, and *De Belgische Standaard*, published in De Panne, provided two such examples. Without directly comparing Ireland and Flanders, they analysed and explained the nationalist insurrection, the opposition of the Catholic clergy to conscription, and the significance of the Sinn Fein movement. Eight articles on the subject appeared in *De Belgische Standaard* between 8 and 22 May, and two in *Ons Vaderland* in their issues of 17-18 May and 23 May 1918. The authors signed off O’Flanders in the former and Patrick Fleming in the latter to further make their point.⁷³⁵ A few weeks previously *Ons Vaderland* wrote an article entitled ‘*La Belgique par-dessus tout*’, asserting that the principle that ‘the nation first and foremost’ was, above all, false and constituted heresy as, for a Catholic, God and religion trumped all.⁷³⁶ At a time when the French socialists were preaching the nation above all else, Belgian

⁷³² MRA, CDH – 118 Fonds GQG II Section, Report on the morale of troops for the period 25 November 1917 – 25 December 1917; and MRA, EX CDH 3768, Report by Hymans for the Council of Minister, 6 July 1918.

⁷³³ RA, Fonds A.E. - 35, Note by King Albert I, 20 March 1918.

⁷³⁴ *L’Indépendance Belge*, 26 June 1918.

⁷³⁵ MRA, EX CDH 3768, Report by Hymans for the Council of Minister, 6 July 1918.

⁷³⁶ *Ibid.*

soldiers were being told to forsake the nation in favour of divinity. It is little wonder, therefore, that chaplains were seen as stoking the agitation that not only threatened to undermine the army's discipline but also the very fabric of Belgian unity and nationalism.

The culmination of the Flemish movement came in March 1918 when a series of 'strikes' as David Englander termed them, saw co-ordinated demonstrations by the now 5,000 strong Front Party (Flemish activists) members.⁷³⁷ They were non-violent in nature but powerful in conveying sentiment. Groups of 100 to 400 men would gather for no more than half an hour during the night displaying Flemish slogans in an act of solidarity.⁷³⁸ Technically speaking their actions could not be classified as mutiny as no orders were directly disobeyed. The men involved would readily disperse to re-join their units and continue the fight, which set them slightly apart from some of the French cases in 1917 where demands had to be met before those involved agreed to take up arms.⁷³⁹ Nevertheless, there were fears that matters might escalate, particularly given the indecision that appeared to reign in the Cabinet concerning the best method of dealing with the situation. King Albert was particularly concerned, writing at some length:

the Flemish question in the army has already been on numerous occasions the order of the day and despite its laborious deliberations, the Government has not been able to agree on what course to take. [...] In the face of recrudescing propaganda and the manifestations in favour of Flemish, there is reason to fear that discipline might one day be compromised. The duty of the Chief of the

⁷³⁷ Englander, 'Mutinies', pp. 197-198.

⁷³⁸ Schepens, *Albert*, p. 198.

⁷³⁹ L.V. Smith, *Between mutiny and obedience: the case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I* (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1994), p. 183; and Greenhalgh, *French Army*, p. 202.

General Staff and the military authorities is to maintain, at all costs, discipline in the army. The duties of the Government are of a higher order, they consist of researching the causes of the movement and to determine what can be done in the way of appeasement and harmony. It is important that the sovereignty is no longer divided on the Flemish question in the army. [...] There are reciprocal concessions to be made. If not, if you leave things to go on, a situation might arise that necessitates an inexorable repression to re-establish order. Would you be unanimous in the current state of affairs to support and approve it? [...] In systematically keeping silent over the aspirations of those Flemings who are even with us, who spill their blood in the trenches, limiting themselves to good-willed protests; do you not think that they would wish us to understand by ourselves, [...] rightly or wrongly, that only agitation can modify what is perceived as our indecision if not our hostility?⁷⁴⁰

The government had intended, as best as possible, to stay clear of making firm commitments to Flemish legislation up to this point. They had believed that whatever agitation there was in the army, was purely isolated and not in danger of such a conflagration. When they were finally faced with mass-unrest the Cabinet's immediate reaction was one of repression, but as suggested above, the King was not convinced that this was the solution.⁷⁴¹ If anything, the Flemish soldiers campaigning for their rights within the framework of liberal Belgium had a point.

Part of the problem was that there was a fundamental misunderstanding over the motives and aims of the movement. This was partly on account of the different degrees of activism present within it. The more restrained portions sought no more than

⁷⁴⁰ RA, Fonds A.E. - 35, Note by King Albert I, 20 March 1918.

⁷⁴¹ Horvat, *Vervolging*, p. 61; and Schepens, *Albert*, pp. 179-180.

a realignment of Flemish alongside French within an independent Belgium, whilst the radicals questioned the concept of Belgium as an entity in itself.⁷⁴² The King even received demands from both Flemings and a few Walloons to have the army split along those lines into two separate institutions. Naturally, King Albert unequivocally refused to entertain any such suggestion, commenting:

I declare that I cannot assume, as Commander in Chief, the responsibility of such a reform in the face of the enemy. No-one can say what may happen but I have the feeling, if not the certainty, that the Walloons would not submit passively. The officers, notably, would be profoundly troubled and I cannot answer for their attitude nor for their acts. I will also highlight that we would not have, and would be far from having, the necessary cadres. One does not improvise on campaign at a critical moment like today such profound and radical modifications.⁷⁴³

This was not only prudent militarily but also demonstrated a strength of character that came to define King Albert's command and reign during the First World War. Ever the pragmatist, it made little sense to ignore the frustrations being aired by his troops and subjects, and even less sense to act against the best interests of the nation. After all, the army still needed to hold its portion of the line in the face of the German Spring offensives to have any say at the peace table should victory be achieved.

Indeed, the intensity of the war in the Spring of 1918 perhaps helped contain the situation for the Belgians, whilst the subsequent re-establishment of the war of movement during the Hundred Days, which saw the Belgian army take to the offensive to liberate their country, proved to be the perfect tonic to raise the eroding morale. It

⁷⁴² MRA, CDH – 118 Fonds GQG II Section, Report on the morale of troops for the period 25 October 1917 – 25 November 1917.

⁷⁴³ RA Fonds A.E. - 35, Note by King Albert I, 20 March 1918.

demonstrates the ephemeral nature of the agitation, which although based upon real desires and pre-war social anxieties, never sought to undermine the ability of the army to perform its primary role of asserting its continued existence and independence. In this sense, there is a certain truth in the assertion made by Aloys Van de Vyvere, the Minister of Finance, in July 1918 when opposing a counter-propaganda idea by Hymans to combat the Flemish movement. He stated, ‘Mr Hymans’ propaganda would be complete if it were true that there were neither Flemings, nor Walloons, that there were only Belgians. Undoubtedly, it must be that there are only Belgians, but these Belgians – with the exception of a small minority who would be wrong to assume they were more complete Belgians than others – wish, as is their right, to remain Flemings and Walloons.’⁷⁴⁴ It reveals an intimate appreciation of the Belgian connection to nationalism through regional roots. Whilst there were those who could claim to be Belgian without recourse to further qualification, there were others who adopted a Flemish concept of Belgian identity and others a Walloon concept. Perhaps, this could be localised even further. Ultimately, however, the majority of soldiers who went to war had a shared identity from two different sources that manifestly expressed itself in the dogged defence of their country under the most trying of circumstances. The Flemish movement, simply put, was one expression trying to attain parity with the other, only boiling over when war-weariness caught up with the Belgians as it had already done with the majority of other belligerent nations. Indeed, it has even been shown that Flemish nationalism in the post-war years needed an origin to validate its interwar agenda, which was to be belatedly found in the troubles of 1918 despite their

⁷⁴⁴ MRA, EX CDH 3768, Response by Van de Vyvere, Minister of Finance to Hymans’ Report, 6 July 1918.

relatively limited aims.⁷⁴⁵ Even the erection of the Flemish Tower in Diksmuide in 1930 reflected post-war sentiments more than wartime divisions; its significance to memory and symbolic relevance only being heightened when it was suspiciously blown up in 1946.⁷⁴⁶

The First World War brought to an end what really was a long nineteenth century for Belgium. The many social and political tensions that had dominated the civilian milieu and overflowed into its military counterpart were exposed as German boots crossed the border on 4 August 1914. The army itself was in a poor state. Its organisation was in turmoil following a series of changes that saw men from four separate recruiting systems called up to defend the nation. The majority were reservists with little meaningful military experience to draw on, whilst the equipment at their disposal was similarly unprepared for the nature of modern warfare. Notwithstanding the odds stacked against them, the Belgian army succeeded in many respects in fulfilling its role and the country's obligations by stoically committing itself to a costly defensive action from the Meuse to the Yser. Anglophone historiography has generally viewed Belgium as simply the geographical location where part of the First World War took place. However, the steadfast and pragmatic decision-making of King Albert, which was often misconstrued as stubborn incompetence, demonstrated the agency and role of a nation that was fully intent on making its presence felt. Indeed, it was paramount; for in the tenacity of the army on the Yser for four years the continued existence of Belgium endured. Although help was at hand, the importance of the 1914 campaign, that saw the Belgian army retain a portion of its territory under its own

⁷⁴⁵ B. De Wever, *Greep naar de macht. Vlaams-nationalisme en Nieuwe Orde. Het VNV 1933-1945* (Uitgeverij Lannoo, Tielt, 1994), p. 28.

⁷⁴⁶ I.F.W. Beckett, *The Great War, 1914-1918* (Pearson, Harlow, 2007), p. 613.

sovereignty, was essential in providing its men and its occupied civilians with the fortitude to sustain themselves amidst the most trying of circumstances.

The ability to endure the war was as much a top-down conundrum as it was an individual effort. Disciplinary measures to keep an ailing army in the field were a necessary response to the crisis of 1914; during which time seven of the 12 Belgian military executions took place. Following the establishment of static warfare and the passing of the immediate danger, the army realised that the coercive methods were of secondary importance in the maintenance of morale and swiftly altered their approach to include more supportive measures. The military authorities began a slow process of refitting the army and providing it with as many comforts as were made available to them. Yet despite this, recourse to charity in providing materials for recreation was equally important. Education and sport played a huge role in creating positive distractions for a largely citizen force that had always felt detached from its army. The unifying effects of sport and better prospects in a post-war world through qualifications (both heavily supported directly by the Monarchy) had a great impact on the lives of the individuals who were able to benefit.

Yet discord threatened to undermine the supportive mechanisms put in place. The Flemish movement, which gathered pace as of the winter of 1917-18 and the accompanying war-weariness, was a potentially catastrophic development that might have ended Belgium's participation in the war and by extension its continued existence as an independent sovereign state. However, its motivations and aims were far less radical than its post-war incarnation. The majority of Flemings still believed themselves to be Belgian, despite their deep-rooted affection for their respective localities and traditions. Indeed, they were no different to their Walloon counterparts in this respect. Their grievance was more with the lack of appreciation from some quarters that a

Flemish interpretation of Belgian identity could have parity with a Walloon one, despite the dominance of the French language in the country. To a degree, the demonstrations were a reaffirmation of the fact that they did consider themselves Belgian and were prepared to fight alongside the Walloons to rid their country of the invader, the 'other', with whom they certainly had nothing in common. In this sense, the words of Hew Strachan that 'as Belgium lost its territory it found an identity' prove particularly perceptive.⁷⁴⁷

⁷⁴⁷ Strachan, *To Arms*, p. 159.

Conclusion

Throughout the period under consideration it is evident that the Belgian army failed in its task as a tool of nation building in a linguistically, culturally and politically fractured society. The ramifications of decades' worth of social debates that emanated from competing identifications with the country and its political institutions significantly undermined the military capabilities of the army, charged primarily with the task of protecting independence and upholding neutrality. Yet in many ways it reflected the society from which it was drawn. The deep-rooted anti-militarism that came to define public and political reactions to the army were very much in evidence through the relegation of military issues behind those of a social nature. Chief among these was that of language, which came increasingly to define local identities within society as well as the army itself. In a country whose revolution in 1830 had spawned from predominantly economic considerations, such splintering towards parochialisms is not unsurprising.⁷⁴⁸ It reinforced the dichotomy between centre and periphery in a rapidly industrialising country. The effect was an echoing of anti-militarism from both the Catholic and Liberal parties, which sought to maintain favour with the small, but powerful, electorate through reducing the military burden. Political interference of this nature consistently plagued the army's attempts to institute much-needed reforms and resulted in a militarily ineffective force taking the field in 1914. However, while it might have been expected to collapse in the face of overwhelming force, the army and the nation found a resolve to endure the trials of a modern war for which they were not prepared. When faced with 'the other' against which to define itself, Belgium's parallel

⁷⁴⁸ Witte, *Construction*, pp. 41-42.

identities converged within a wider concept of the nation that allowed it to set aside its pre-war divisions to fight towards a common end.

Even at the top of the military establishment, defining a military identity proved troublesome. The officer corps began its search for professionalization by incorporating high-ranking French and Polish officers to fill the void left by returning Belgian officers whose careers had been stunted whilst in Dutch service. While it certainly became more Belgian as the nineteenth century progressed, issues of language, religion and politics threatened to undermine the martial spirit inculcated by the increasingly influential *École Militaire*. Political interference in these matters bore much of the responsibility. Pro-French legislation, for example, ensured that a disproportionate number of French-speaking officers persisted throughout the century. Flemish-speakers retained a presence, but became increasingly bilingual in pursuit of professional opportunities. This reflected a wider social trend in Flanders among the lower-middle classes competing for managerial positions, which helped ignite the resolve of the *Flamingant* movement's quest for linguistic parity by the turn of the twentieth century.⁷⁴⁹

However, concerns over career progression among all officers grew as promotion rates slowed. Lengthening seniority lists coupled with corruption and patronage caused disillusionment among conscientious and ambitious officers. Suggestions that the officer corps had become insular were somewhat justified in this respect, though claims of exclusivity emanating from a military class were clearly wide of the mark. The healthy number of commissions granted to NCOs, which reflected a continuation of the revolutionary spirit of equal opportunity, bore testament to that. Nevertheless, disenchantment with the system prompted many ambitious officers to sell out to the commercial opportunities in the Congo from the 1880s. This left the

⁷⁴⁹ De Wever, 'Dutch-Speaking Belgians', pp. 55-56.

officer corps with a limited number of career officers at its disposal and revealed, above anything else, the slow unravelling of professionalism that had been so highly prized in the army's formative years.

Political interference in the recruitment of the rank and file was even more pronounced than in the officer corps. The obvious failings of the ballot system that allowed the wealthier sections of society to escape the military charge undermined the army's dual role of national defence and as an instrument of unification. In place of the desired intelligent class of recruits, the substitutes and replacements furnished by them, proved detrimental to discipline and efficiency. Moreover, the ballot ensured that the army was not a true reflection of society in terms of its social composition. Politically, however, neither Catholics nor Liberals could afford to endorse the calls for personal and obligatory service emanating from senior officers, for fear of estranging the small electorate who were the main beneficiaries of replacement. Indeed, a succession of Catholic ministries from 1884 onwards were elected on promises of reducing the military burden. This included reducing time spent under arms as well as fiscal frugality. It was a further demonstration of the power of local over national interests.

In place of the short-service conscription along the Prussian model, anti-militaristic pressure succeeded in convincing the government to waive the advice of the 1901 Commission and to implement voluntary recruitment instead. It supposedly adhered to the national principles of the liberty of vocations, although it proved beyond contestation the deep-rooted aversion to a life under arms. Skeletal units between 1902 and 1909, coupled with a change in the Catholic Party leadership, saw the first step towards achieving full-blown conscription. A more national army was established through the abolition of replacement, as the one son per family law was introduced as a stepping-stone towards a more capable military force. In 1913 this was extended to

full general service that sought to raise the wartime establishment from 100,000 to 340,000 men by 1925. Yet, as a corollary to the disaffected wings of the Catholic Party's Flemish representatives, regional recruitment supplanted the national system that had hoped to create a melting pot from which to extract a collective unity.⁷⁵⁰ It demonstrated the failure of the army to break the strong regional bonds of the individuals through what had been a largely defective system of recruitment.

Beyond the system itself, the unwritten social contract between communities and the State was deemed to be a one-sided affair. The youth of the nation was compelled to serve in the interests of defending a neutrality that was seemingly unthreatened, whilst receiving little physical, moral or educational support in return. The 'school of the nation' purported to transform the often illiterate, pious and backward peasant into a productive contributor to society whilst under arms. However, appalling conditions, corruptive elements in the barracks, and a disproportionately harsh disciplinary regime created fissures between the army and society. This was particularly the case in rural Flanders where families believed that Catholic values were being systematically undermined through interaction with Liberal and latterly socialist Walloons. It reinforced the already prevalent anti-militarism in these parts and explains why the Catholic Party came to defy the army on military issues for the majority of the nineteenth century.

The failure to adequately put in place traditional supports for its recruits over successive generations was reflected in the recalcitrance of many young men unaccustomed to the discipline of military life. The fact that many Flemish soldiers were tried by courts martial over the period in question returned the army to the Chamber of Representatives as a crucible for social debates. At the centre of this were

⁷⁵⁰ Boijen, 'Het Leger als Smeltkroes', pp. 55-70.

the 'school wars' that pitted Catholics against Liberals over the influence of clerical education. The Liberal position echoed the sentiment that Flanders, its language, customs and beliefs, had been left behind by Wallonia's industrialisation during the 1840s. Certainly literacy rates were poor in Belgium, but it was difficult to draw a direct correlation between Clerical schooling and indiscipline. Indeed, many Flemish representatives intimated that linguistic discrimination from the French-dominated officer corps could explain such figures. What could not be explained was the use of corporal punishment in Belgium after the rest of Europe had moved towards a more humanitarian concept of rehabilitation. Brutalities, often directed against the uneducated Fleming, contributed to the perpetuation of anti-militarism and regional affiliations within society. Far from improving the youth entrusted to it, the 'school of the nation' succeeded largely in alienating those who were unable to bend to its methods.

Whereas the *bourgeoisie* was able to leave the burden and harsh realities of military service to the lower classes, they could not so easily escape their public duties in the Civic Guard. While exhibiting flashes of pride in the exclusivity of their corps and its role as the guardians of the Revolution, they were no more drawn to the idea of militarism in this form than in the army proper. Certainly, the organisational failings did not help foster a martial spirit, with professionalism often marginalised by abuses during the quinquennial election of officers. Nevertheless, its performance alongside the more experienced Gendarmerie during the 1848 crisis suggested that it could play a role in the maintenance of internal order. This would prove to be the zenith of its existence, however, as prolonged periods of peace, a reorganisation that limited participation to a few urban centres around the country, and a lack of finance from the

authorities who did not trust it to fulfil the role of a reserve force, sent the Civic Guard into decline.

The effects were clearly noted during the 1886 workers' riots, in which inexperience and indiscipline saw the Civic Guard's traditional role as an aid to the civil power usurped by the increasingly important and ever-growing Gendarmerie. The faith shown in the latter's ability as the primary State bulwark against the social upheaval of the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was testament to its professionalism, organisation, and apolitical nature. It was held in stark contrast to the Civic Guard, who in its urban composition had been subjected to Liberal, and in some cases Socialist, ideals that placed it at odds with the Catholic Government's attitude towards civil unrest. While the *bourgeoisie* ought to have provided the surest safeguard against the rise of socialism, shared beliefs in the extension of the franchise and anti-clericalism left the authorities unsure of the Civic Guard's reliability. As with other aspects of the army, the auxiliary forces demonstrated the centrality of political affiliations and the influence of the urban/rural divide in the problematic development of the military establishment.

Amidst the lengthy deliberations over the composition, organisation and capabilities of the armed forces, civil-military debates equally had to contend with the issue of fortifications. The expenditure involved in the construction and renovation of the national redoubt at Antwerp (1859 and 1906) as well as Liège and Namur (1887) significantly compromised military reform. In order to appease a disaffected electorate, governments (particularly the Catholic Ministries from 1884 onwards) were forced into assurances that the annual contingent would not be raised, despite its obvious necessity. The *Meetings* of Antwerp were particularly prominent in holding the government to account and demonstrated, again, the designs of local and commercial interests over

national safety. This was mirrored around the country and created the conditions for party-politics to intervene. The Liberals were the guiltiest in this respect after losing power in the mid-1880s. Their attempts to rally local support in Liège and Namur against new constructions in 1887 in order to sow seeds of discontent within the Catholic ranks, was all the more galling given their support of the project whilst in power themselves. The situation was to repeat itself in 1906 with the redevelopment of Antwerp, and revealed the ugly nature of political interference in matters that ought to have left entirely to the military authorities.

Ostensibly the debates revolved around the strategic questions of how to assimilate the army and its fortifications into a system that would best answer Belgium's international obligations to defend its neutrality. The geography of the country and the capabilities of the army lent Antwerp to being the centre of any future strategy. Under the direction of Brialmont, Antwerp, with its polygonal forts, was designed to act as the final bastion for the nation in the event of a direct invasion. Along with bridgeheads on the Meuse, it created a central point of mobilisation that would allow a concentration of forces at the decisive point to delay an enemy whilst aid from a guarantor power arrived. This decision, taken in 1859, was to endure until 1914 despite alterations to technology and European geo-politics somewhat outpacing its principles. Indeed, developments in artillery and explosives limited the effectiveness of both Antwerp and the Meuse forts at various junctures throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whilst Prussia's acquisition of Alsace-Lorraine in 1870-71 reduced the probability of an invasion towards Antwerp. Notwithstanding, fortifications had proven useful in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 and perpetuated the idea that they might be the decisive point upon which the field army could lean in the defence of the nation. In spite of evolutions in strategic thought in the decade

preceding the outbreak of war, Belgium remained wedded to its 1859 principles simply out of deference to the effort and finances invested in them. Although it is impossible to prove whether this was the correct choice, the realities of the invasion in August 1914 demonstrated that neither the fortifications nor the field army were adequately prepared for a modern war.

Operationally, the Belgian army performed better than many had expected given the country's pre-war civil-military issues. Initially, its defence on the Meuse, which delayed the German advance by 13 days, was viewed as a minor triumph despite the obvious deficiencies of the fortifications when faced with modern heavy artillery. Subsequently, its tenacity during the retreat to Antwerp, but particularly on the Yser, encapsulated a newfound unity of action that resembled something akin to nationalism. The army's contribution to the operational theatre was limited as a result of losses sustained in these opening encounters, much to the annoyance of Belgium's allies. King Albert, acutely aware of the capabilities of his depleted force refused to bow to British and French pressures to prematurely risk his army, which had become the embodiment of independence while the nation was under occupation. In doing so, he restored an agency to Belgian participation that was dismissed at the time and has subsequently been removed from the historiography. Rightly or wrongly, the Belgian army only retook the offensive during the Hundred Days to liberate its territory and to secure its own position at the peace table at which it hoped to play an active role to secure territorial gains.⁷⁵¹

For the majority of the war, however, the Belgian army was simply forced to endure as it recovered from its 1914 exertions. Discipline and morale were of primary importance in this respect. Although it might be contended that the rate of executions

⁷⁵¹ See Stevenson, 'Belgium, Luxemburg', pp. 504-522.

before Christmas of 1914 was disproportionately high, this was purely a result of the chaos of war during a period of crisis that required the strong hand of authority to keep the army in the field. From the summer of 1915, it was recognised that the rebuilding process required a more supportive system to maintain morale among an army whose deprivations exceeded those of most belligerents. Material acquisitions, in the form of food and clothing were as well received as recreational literature, sporting competitions and leave. Yet, the physical separation from loved-ones proved difficult to distance from the minds of the citizen soldier, which caused anxieties to surface when the war-weariness during the winter of 1917-18 took hold. *Flamingantism*, encouraged by German propaganda, emerged as a result and threatened to undermine the unity displayed since the outbreak of war. Yet, as before the war, Flemish demands were more concerned with attaining parity within a wider concept of a Belgian nation. This was exemplified by the fact that the majority of soldiers involved in the March 1918 'strikes' willingly returned to action to complete the job of ridding the country of the invader. In this respect, the convergence of multiple identifications with the Belgian nation becomes evident. When faced with 'the other' against which to define itself, the Belgian army was able to use the ordeal of war as a milieu to belatedly draw the nation together.

In many ways the war proved to be a watershed for Belgium and its army as it emerged from neutrality to secure a more active role in the new world. This resulted in an alliance with France and the freedom to develop its military establishment without international constraints. Conscription saw the army grow to an unprecedented 600,000 men by the mid-1930s, but a combination of economic depression following the Great War and an aversion to new 'offensive' technologies, such as the tank, left the army's re-equipment short of the mark. Faith in fortifications, however, saw the construction

of Eban-Emael near the Dutch/German border that would infamously be taken by a *coup de main* in 1940.⁷⁵² Yet, the First World War was nothing but a momentary respite in a continuum of the nineteenth century civil-military milieu. The Flemish question in the army took on greater significance as *Flamingantism* mutated into a volatile separatist movement. Regional recruitment on linguistic grounds in 1923, and the introduction of Flemish as an official language of command in the army in 1928, had been too long coming. It revealed much wider fissures in society and translated into a demoralised army and officer corps that had still not fully recovered from the travails of the Great War. As such, the army lacked even greater homogeneity than it had in 1914, and for a second time in a generation was confronted with a German invasion for which it was unprepared.⁷⁵³ Unlike the First World War, however, the nation lacked the strong hand of leadership that had seen King Albert conceal the civil-military issues of the nineteenth century. Under the direction of his son, Leopold III, the army of May 1940 was unable to repeat the heroics of Liège, Antwerp and the Yser.

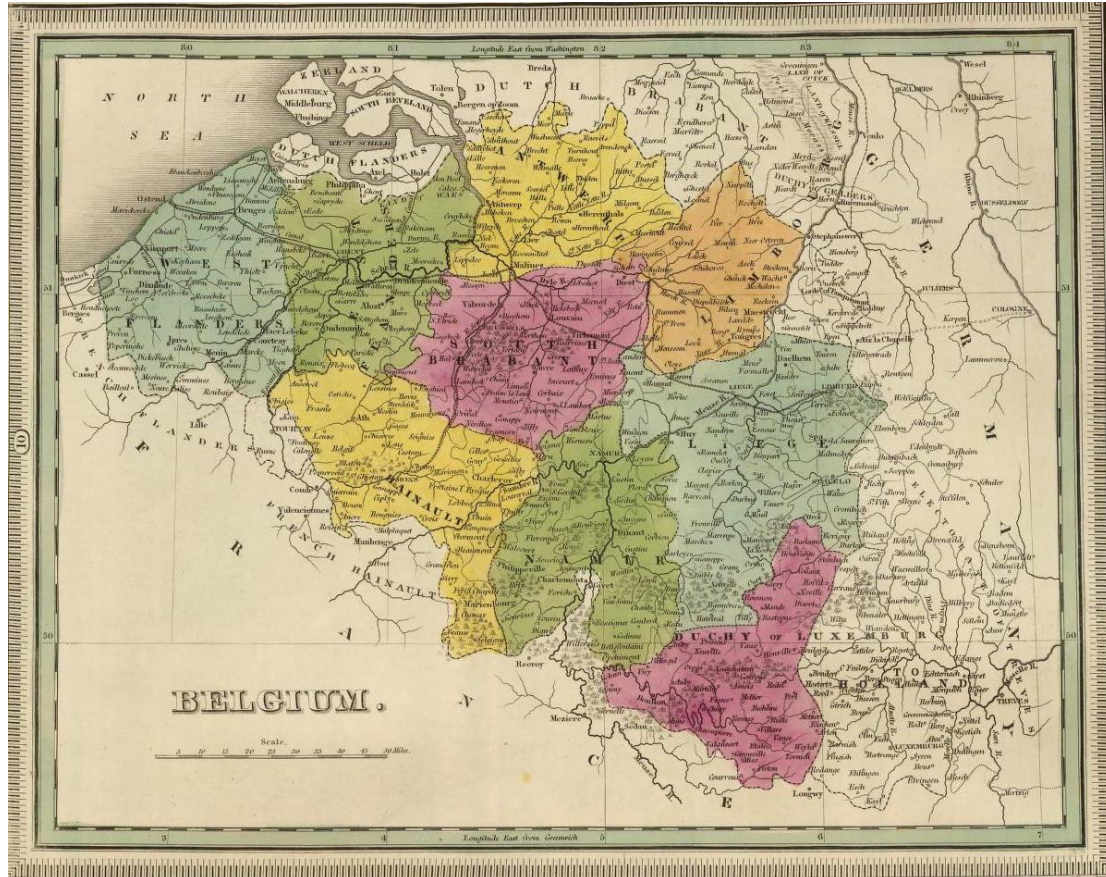
⁷⁵² A. Crahay, *L'Armée belge entre les deux guerres* (L. Musin, Brussels, 1978), pp. 88 & 138-141.

⁷⁵³ E. Wanty, 'Le milieu militaire belge 1830-1945', in *Actes du Colloque d'Histoire Militaire Belge (1830-1980)/Akten van het Colloquium over de Belgische Krijgsgeschiedenis (1830-1980)* (26-28 March 1980) (Musée Royal de l'Armée/Koninklijk Legersmuseum, Brussels, 1981), pp. 399-400.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Map of Belgium

Henry S. Tanner 1845, 1:1 170,000



Appendix 2 – List of politicians in office 1830-1918.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Prime Minister</i>	<i>Political Party</i>	<i>Minister of War</i>
28 Sep 1830 – 4 Nov 1830	Louis de Potter	Liberal-social	André Jolly (1830) Jean Goethals (1830) André Jolly (1830) Albert Goblet d’Alviella (1830 – 1831)
5 Nov 1830 – 26 Feb 1831	Sylvain Van de Weyer	Liberal-social	Albert Goblet d’Alviella (1830 – 1831)
27 Feb 1831 – 23 Mar 1831	Étienne de Gerlache	Catholic	Albert Goblet d’Alviella (1830 – 1831)
24 Mar 1831 – 23 Jul 1831	Joseph Lebeau	Liberal	Constantin D’Hane- Steenhuysen (1831) Charles de Brouckere (1831) Amédée De Faily (1831)
24 Jul 1831 – 19 Oct 1832	Félix de Muelenaere	Catholic	Amédée De Faily (1831) Constantin D’Hane- Steenhuysen (1831) Charles de Brouckere (1831 - 1832) Félix de Mérode (1832) Louis Evain (1832 – 1836)
20 Oct 1832 – 3 Aug 1834	Charles Rogier	Liberal	Louis Evain (1832 – 1836)
4 Aug 1834 – 17 Apr 1840	Barthélémy de Theux de Meylandt	Catholic	Louis Evain (1832 – 1836) Jean-Pierre Willmar (1836 – 1840)
18 Apr 1840 – 12 Apr 1841	Joseph Lebeau	Liberal	Gérard Buzen (1840 – 1842)
13 Apr 1841 – 29 Jul 1845	Jean-Baptiste Nothomb	Liberal	Gérard Buzen (1840 – 1842) Henri de Liem (1842 – 1843) Léandre Desmazières (1843) Pierre Dupont (1843 – 1846)

30 Jul 1845 – 30 Mar 1846	Sylvain Van de Weyer	Liberal	Pierre Dupont (1843 – 1846) Jules d’Anethan (1846)
31 Mar 1846 – 11 Aug 1847	Barthélémy de Theux de Meylandt	Catholic	Albert Prisse (1846 – 1847)
12 Aug 1847 – 30 Oct 1852	Charles Rogier	Liberal	Pierre Emmanuel Félix Chazal (1847 – 1849) Charles Rogier (1849 – 1850) Mathieu Brialmont (1850 – 1851) Victor Anoul (1851 – 1855)
31 Oct 1852 – 29 Mar 1855	Henri de Brouckère	Liberal	Victor Anoul (1851 – 1855)
30 Mar 1855 – 8 Nov 1857	Pierre De Decker	Catholic	Léonard Greindl (1855 – 1857)
9 Nov 1857 – 2 Jan 1868	Charles Rogier	Liberal	Édouard Berten (1857 – 1859) Pierre Emmanuel Félix Chazal (1859 – 1866) Auguste Goethals (1866 – 1868)
3 Jan 1868 – 1 Jul 1870	Walthère Frère- Orban	Liberal	Bruno Renard (1868 – 1870)
2 Jul 1870 – 6 Dec 1871	Jules d’Anethan	Catholic	Henri Guillaume (1870 – 1873)
7 Dec 1871 – 20 Aug 1874	Barthélémy de Theux de Meylandt	Catholic	Henri Guillaume (1870 – 1873) Séraphin Thiebault (1873 – 1878)
21 Aug 1874 – 18 Jun 1878	Jules Malou	Catholic	Séraphin Thiebault (1873 – 1878)
19 Jun 1878 – 15 Jun 1884	Walthère Frère- Orban	Liberal	Bruno Renard (1878 – 1879) Jean-Baptiste Liagre (1879 – 1880) Guillaume Gratry (1880 – 1884)
16 Jun 1884 – 25 Oct 1884	Jules Malou	Catholic	Charles Pontus (1884 – 1893)
26 Oct 1884 – 25 Mar 1894	Auguste Beernaert	Catholic	Charles Pontus (1884 – 1893) Jacques-Joseph Brassine (1893 – 1896)
26 Mar 1894 – 24 Feb 1896	Jules de Burlet	Catholic	Jacques-Joseph Brassine (1893 – 1896)

25 Feb 1896 – 23 Jan 1899	Paul de Smet de Naeyer	Catholic	Jacques-Joseph Brassine (1893 – 1896) Jules Vandenpeereboom (1896 – 1899)
24 Jan 1899 – 4 Aug 1899	Jules Vandenpeereboom	Catholic	Jules Vandenpeereboom (1896 – 1899)
5 Aug 1899 – 1 May 1907	Paul de Smet de Naeyer	Catholic	Alexandre Cousebandt d'Alkemade (1899 – 1907)
2 May 1907 – 8 Jan 1908	Jules de Trooz	Catholic	Joseph Hellebaut (1907 – 1912)
9 Jan 1908 – 16 Jun 1911	François Schollaert	Catholic	Joseph Hellebaut (1907 – 1912)
17 Jun 1911 - 31 May 1918	Charles de Broqueville	Catholic	Joseph Hellebaut (1907 – 1912) Charles de Broqueville (1912 – 1917) Victor Michel (1912) Charles de Broqueville (1912 – 1917) Armand De Ceuninck (1917 – 1918)
1 Jun 1918 – 20 Nov 1918	Gérard Cooreman	Catholic	Armand De Ceuninck (1917 – 1918)

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