Chapter 1

Belgium and World War I

In order to fully understand the formation of Belgian defense policy between the World Wars, it is necessary to be familiar with the formation of policy before World War I and with World War I, which so scarred Belgium and Belgians that their later policies were aimed above all else at keeping Belgium out of any future wars. Belgian defense policy before World War I had to deal with many of the same issues that would affect it during the interwar period, notably size, language concerns, deployment plans, and conflicts between royal and ministerial authority. This shows that the problems were inherent in Belgium’s position and not just tied to a particular time. During the war itself, the Belgians played an important part in the defeat of the Central Powers, especially Germany, although Germany worked towards the fragmentation of Belgium.

This first chapter looks at the issues with which pre-war Belgian defense policymakers had to deal, which foreshadowed the issues that would bedevil interwar policymakers, starting with the desired size of the military. It then goes into a discussion of the language issue. Because of its importance throughout Belgian history to this day, the chapter gives a brief history of the issue and attempts to deal with it in the military before the war. It also addresses the controversy among the military and civilian policymakers over where to deploy the army on the eve of World War I. During the war, Belgian heroism arguably saved the Entente Powers from defeat, but at the cost of casualties and German occupation of most of the country. German behavior, in the forms of atrocities and a brutal occupation, determined Belgians to avoid a repeat, and it was this care that was the primary concern of the founders of Belgian defense policy in the interwar period. German behavior is thus examined in the chapter. The linguistic issue was exacerbated during the war as the Germans attempted to split off the Flemings from the Walloons and as many Flemish soldiers resented being given orders by Francophone officers, even if the stories about Flemish soldiers dying because they did not understand the orders seem to be canards. These Flemish soldiers formed the ‘Frontist’ movement that would be a nucleus of the Flemish movement in the interwar period. These issues, and the attempts by the Belgian leaders to address them, are a focus of this chapter. The chapter ends with an examination of Belgian attempts to increase national security

1 See below, p. 36.
after the war, especially through reparations – leading to the Belgo-French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 – and the acquisition of new territory from the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Germany.

The Size of the Army Before World War I

One of the first issues the Belgians had to face, just as it would be faced again in 1936, was the size of the military. Foreshadowing the arguments made in 1936, the justification for the increase in size of the army was to dissuade either the French or the Germans from seeing Belgium as an easy road. Charles de Broqueville, the Belgian prime minister, was responsible for potentially doubling the size of the army before World War I by winning obligatory military service for all able-bodied men in 1913 in the light of the government’s desire to expand the army to 340,000 men with 150,000 men in the field army, 130,000 in the fortress army, and 60,000 in the reserves. The field army needed to build two new corps, for a total of five, to be ready for a simultaneous invasion. However, the law was not passed without controversy. Just as the Flemish would resist military spending before World War II, the Catholic Party, and especially its Flemish members, opposed military spending before World War I. The function of the army, just as twenty-six years later, would be to be strong enough to dissuade any over-aggressive neighbor from using Belgian territory.\(^2\)

The Language Issue to World War I

The language issue was as contentious before World War I as before World War II, and the Belgian army had always taken its role as ‘melting pot’ very seriously. The importance of this issue both at the time and still to this day merits a thorough discussion of its history. Belgium was, as it still is, divided into two main linguistic/cultural groups, the Flemish, whose language is essentially Dutch, and the Walloons. French, spoken by the Walloons, was the dominant language and the Walloons did not discourage Flemings from learning French. Anybody making any kind of policy in Belgium had to contend with the ‘Flemish Question.’\(^3\)

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\(^2\) Pawly and Lierneux, pp. 3-4; Vanwelkenhuyzen, *Le gâchis des années 30, 1933-1937*, 1: 45, n. 2; Haag, 1: 126-937; de Schaeudprijver, p. 47.