Belgium Looks for Allies

Belgium's attempts to gain security in the interwar period operated on both the diplomatic and military planes and they cannot really be understood in isolation. This chapter looks at the efforts of Belgian diplomats to replace the old statutory neutrality with a series of alliances to guarantee the country against a new German invasion. It begins with a look at the successful Belgian repudiation of neutrality and then examines Belgian attempts at collective security through the League of Nations, the Locarno Pact, and international disarmament. The Belgians also tried to obtain treaties with their two main previous allies, Britain and France, and Belgium would suffer from the inability of the two later to maintain their alliance. Despite the (more than) occasional ruffled feather in Belgian-French, diplomacy, they did succeed in establishing a military accord in 1920. Unfortunately, as we will see in further chapters, it would turn out to be an albatross for the Belgians and would impede the organization of an effective defense. Belgian attempts to gain a similar accord with the British failed.

Belgium had secured its release from the perpetual neutrality imposed upon it by the treaties of 1839. This had been urged even during the war. As Belgian Foreign Minister Baron Beyens had explained to Sir Edward Grey, the British secretary of state for foreign affairs, in 1916:

> Neutrality being abolished, Belgium, decided to make all its efforts to assure its defense, does not, however, desire an alliance with great powers. An alliance fatally leads small states into the orbits of their great neighbors and confers on them politically the role of satellite. The Belgian people, so tested by the world war, aspires to an independence which would be weighed down neither with any international charge nor any political obligation.¹

On July 27, 1917, the Belgian foreign minister declared that the German invasion of Belgium, with its alliance with Austria-Hungary, meant two of its guarantors had violated the original agreement that was therefore now invalid and needed to be modified. The Belgian argument was that because the treaties had not done their job – which was to protect Belgium – and because the trea-

¹ Quoted in ARP-Capelle XV/1/25.
ties had been violated by its signatories, they were null and void and Belgium had the right to determine and practice its own foreign policy. Few Belgians challenged this position. It carried the day both in Belgium and in the other signatories of the treaties of 1839 and Belgium was released from its obligation in this respect. During the interwar period, Belgium would follow a policy close to neutrality but would cherish its right to freely determine that policy.2

Interwar Belgian foreign policy was based on a fear of Germany justified by the horrific experience of German occupation during World War I. Former Belgian Foreign Minister Henri Jaspar summed things up in a speech in Paris in which he sketched the view of “the average Belgian”:

fidelity, strongly tempered with skepticism, vis-à-vis the League of Nations, inveterate mistrust of Germany and of its most pacific affirmations, unanimous decision of the population to defend Belgian territory, and horror of any military adventure into which Belgium could be drawn.3

Both Belgium’s steadfast dedication to the concept of ‘collective security’ until the Rhineland debacle of 1936 and its equally steadfast dedication to ‘independence’ afterwards were based on an assessment of what would best keep the Germans on their own side of the border. Foreign policy affected defense policy because what were perceived to be the needs of the army depended upon the general European climate and especially how big a threat Germany appeared.4

Collective security was embodied in the League of Nations Covenant, especially in Article XVI, which called for members to offer immediate military support to any invaded member, and in the Locarno Pact of 1925, agreed to by Germany, Britain, France, and Italy as well as Belgium, which declared the contemporary borders of Western Europe, including the demilitarization of the Rhineland, inviolable and also required signatories to provide immediate support to the victim of an unprovoked aggression as defined by the Council of the League of Nations. Until the failure of the Locarno regime, Belgian diplomats repeatedly affirmed, at home and abroad, that Belgium’s foreign policy was based on these two documents. The interplay between foreign and military policies was summarized at a 1935 meeting between King Leopold’s secretary,

2 Miller, pp. 70-71.
3 Henri Jaspar, quoted in André de Kerchove [Belgian ambassador in Paris] to Paul van Zeeland [Belgian foreign minister], Paris, April 24, 1936 in AMBAE 1185/1, doc.#2686.
4 Horne and Kramer, pp. 376-381.