The Devèze Years

The years between 1932 and 1936 were of major importance for the formation of Belgian defense policy. They saw the appearance, or reappearance, of major personalities, the opposition in earnest between ‘integral defense of the territory,’ or ‘defense at the frontier,’ and ‘defense in depth,’ the creation of new units that would distinguish themselves in 1940, and the German remilitarization of the Rhineland, the supine response of the Allies to which would impact Belgian defense and foreign policy, making ‘integral defense of the territory’ impossible and ultimately leading to Leopold's declaration of ‘independence.’

The chapter begins with a look at two of the major figures of the time, Minister of National Defense Devèze and Chief of Staff LTG Nuyten, and their opposition, which would roil not only military circles but nationalist circles as well, because their quarrel involved the organization and costs of Belgium's defenses and feelings ran high, especially in more vulnerable Wallonia. It then discusses the formation of the elite Chasseurs ardennais and Unités cyclistes frontières and the budget controversy that would ultimately be the undoing of LTG Nuyten in 1934. That same year saw the ascension of Leopold III and his military advisor, Raoul van Overstraeten. Despite his lack of an official position in the military hierarchy, van Overstraeten is one of the most important figures in Belgian defense policy in the late 1930s through the ‘18-Days’ Campaign’. The chapter looks at his personality and then the dénouement of Nuyten. It studies the important staff talks between the French and Nuyten's successor, LTG Cumont. The motorization of the Belgian Cavalry Corps began on Cumont's watch and we go over the initial controversy between advocates of motor and horse and then the progress of the motorization. Meanwhile, Belgian politicians and generals were arguing over how best to cover the mobilization of the army and, inextricably linked to it, the length of military service for draftees. The chapter addresses the issues and partisans, especially LTG Van den Bergen, who replaced Cumont as chief of staff. The chapter ends with a look at the response of the Locarno powers to the German remilitarization of the Rhineland and its effect on Belgian defense and foreign policy.

The dominant figure for Belgian defense in the first part of the 1932-1940 period was the minister of national defense, Albert Devèze. A child of Ypres in West Flanders, Devèze was born in 1881. By profession a lawyer and a Doctor of Laws, Mr. Devèze was also a major Liberal Party politician. He was the representative of the arrondissement of Brussels from 1912 to 1939, at which time he
switched to the *arrondissement* of Verviers, which he represented until 1946, finishing up back in Brussels from 1946 to 1958, and dying a year later.¹

Devèze was a veteran of World War I, in which he fought as an infantryman and then an artillerist. He would remain a reserve officer even while serving as minister of national defense, which he did for the first time starting on November 20, 1920. The French military attaché in Brussels at the time, General Latour, described Devèze as extremely intelligent and active but very proud, confident, and too ambitious. Devèze was also an enthusiastic Walloon partisan. It was under his ministry that Belgium sent three battalions of infantry and three batteries of artillery into the Ruhr. That August, Devèze succeeded in increasing the term of service for infantrymen to twelve months and from ten to thirteen for artillerists while reducing the terms for the service branches to ten months. He was replaced on August 6 of that same year. He would return to the Ministry of National Defense on October 23, 1932. In 1934, General Swaegers, a departing *aide de camp* of King Albert I, described Mr. Devèze to then-Colonel Raoul van Overstraeten as “of impulsive temperament, impulsive, has a new idea every day …. On the other hand, the minister is active; he stimulates, he circulates … *[sic]*.” Van Overstraeten himself wrote

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