Belgium’s international status and defense policy did not significantly change between the passing of the defense bill of 1936 and the outbreak of World War II. Belgians were united in maintaining the country’s ‘independence’ both diplomatically and by building a strong enough military to dissuade any potential (German) invader. There was no significant Belgian reaction to the Anschluss (the German union with Austria) and the policy of neutrality did not change as a result of the Sudeten Crisis, which tested Belgian diplomacy and resulted in a mobilization oriented as much towards the south as to the east. Nor did it change while Hitler occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia and took Klaipeda from Lithuania. Meanwhile, the Belgians were building new fortifications, preparing a new main line of defense to be known as the K-W Line, and remaking their mobilization and defense plans in light of the problems experienced during the ‘Sudeten Crisis.’

The chapter looks at the arming of the Belgian forces and the assessment of the army by foreign military professionals. It discusses the building of Belgian fortifications, especially the the ‘K-W Line’ (so named because it extended from Koningshooikt south to Wavre), on which the Belgians and Allies planned to fight in 1940. It then examines the development of the Belgian Air Force. It shows how Belgian plans and soldiers were tried and found wanting by the Sudeten Crisis.

The Belgian army spent the period between the passage of the defense bill in December of 1936 and the German invasion instituting the provisions of the bill, hurriedly preparing for a European war that seemed more and more likely. Because of Belgium’s status as “a small, peaceful nation,” these preparations primarily consisted in equipping the army with defensive weapons at the expense of offensive aircraft and armored units. The Belgian army was lavishly equipped with the new 47mm anti-tank gun, at the rate of 60 per infantry division. By comparison, a German infantry division had 36 37mm anti-tank guns although each infantry regiment had another twelve while Belgian regiments only had six. The Belgians also “received a new grenade launcher, the light machine gun was renovated, the rifle modernized, the endowment in 75mm mortars tripled.” More artillery was added to each infantry division (4 to 5

---

1 Pierre van Zuylen points out that the inability of the Franco-British to protect Austria showed the importance of the policy of ‘independence,’ Les Mains Libres, p. 421.
groups) and to the army corps (4 to 6 groups) while some corps artillery was motorized. In addition, the D.T.C.A. adopted the very good 40mm Bofors anti-aircraft gun and Belgian signals capabilities were improved.²

The Development and Assessment of the Belgian Military

By August 1938, most of the changes had been instituted and were put on display in Belgium’s largest maneuvers since World War I. The American military attaché, Lieutenant Colonel Robert D. Brown, took particularly favorable note of the Belgian 47mm anti-tank gun and of the morale of the Belgian soldiers despite the weather and the effort. He was impressed with the army’s training and determination and noted the efficiency of the General Staff. He saw the Belgian army as a significant obstacle to any German invasion. LTC Brown rated the Belgian army’s fortress and specialist units, the Chasseurs ardennais, and the Cavalry Corps as “excellent,” although the Cavalry Corps was expected to serve as mobile infantry rather than as an armored striking force. The six active infantry divisions and four of the ‘first reserve’ divisions were “good,” the other two ‘first reserve’ divisions “fair to good,” and five ‘second reserve’ divisions “poor to fair.” The Germans essentially echoed those evaluations. The German military attaché in Brussels assessed favorably the Belgian soldiers, equipment, and officers, and considered the Belgian army “a defensive instrument of the first order.” He even thought the Germans could learn something from the defensive organization of Belgian battalions.³

There were problems. Belgian army Captain Guy Dumortier notes that although the reequipment and expansion of the Belgian army went well initially, problems, especially regarding foreign materiel, such as planes and anti-aircraft artillery, arose alongside the growing international crisis. LTC Brown reported the lamentable state of the Belgian air arm and warned of the vulnerability of the Belgian cities and industries. He also found the biggest problem facing the Belgian army to be a lack of modern equipment, including rifles,
