Book Review

Les Diplomates belges, Raoul Delcorde*

Although not meant to be a scientific study of Belgian diplomatic history, this publication nevertheless presents a long overdue “illustrated” account of the evolution of Belgium’s diplomatic corps from the foundation of the state in 1831 until today. Especially the fact that the book contains a variety of illustrative material, including many photographs, going back to the very early years of the international activities of the then young Kingdom of Belgium, up to a recent visit of the foreign affairs minister to the Democratic Republic of Congo, makes the work an enduring source of historical value.

The book is published in the original French language version accompanied by parallel editions translated into Dutch and English. The style is direct and narrative throughout, with a minimum of footnotes. The author, who is himself a senior career diplomat, divides his work into three main parts and adds at the end a few tables which show the evolution of the diplomatic network of Belgium over the past 180 years.

Part one is largely historical and describes the predominantly consular activities of Belgium in the 19th century with the presence of a number of fully fledged diplomatic missions. In the first two subsections the author gives a rather detailed overview of Belgium’s foreign relations under its first king, Leopold I (the starting years) and then continues under Leopold II, when the first expansion of the country’s diplomatic network occurred. The young Belgian industry of those times was very keen to replace the existing

consular network of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands by a genuine Belgian one. Less than a week after he took the oath of office as the new King of the Belgians, Leopold I appointed Belgium's first two consuls, in Manchester and in Liverpool. The number increased rapidly to reach 48 in 1835, and at the end of his reign in 1865, Belgium counted 361 consular posts, nearly as many as our current honorary consuls and professional consuls together. Indeed, most consuls were and would remain honorary consuls, combining their consular function with that of business or trade. This consular network was very important for Belgium's exports. Although one of the smaller European nations, Belgium ranked among the five biggest exporting countries in the world by the end of the 19th century. The consular posts were dense in Europe, but stretched as far as Buenos Aires, Melbourne, Manila and Canton.

A sovereign nation of course also needs diplomatic missions, first and foremost in the capitals of the powers that, in the case of Belgium, had pledged to defend and to guarantee its neutrality. Ten years after its independence Belgium had embassies in all the main European countries, including Russia and the Ottoman Empire as well as in the United States of America. The presence of honorary consuls was often the steppingstone for a consecutive diplomatic mission, although it could take time as in the case of China, where only after the signing of a third trade treaty in 1865, a consulate general in Shanghai (1866) and finally a diplomatic mission in Beijing (1868) could be opened. It took even longer in Japan before a Belgian mission was established there (1872). In that other Asian monarchy, Thailand, for over a decade a special envoy and special advisor to the King (Gustave Rolin-Jaquemyns in the 1860s) had been present, but Belgium only inaugurated a mission at Bangkok in 1904. A mission to Mexico was re-opened in 1879, after the first one was closed in 1867 when Emperor Maximilian, King Leopold II’s brother in law, was defeated by the revolutionaries, the first time that Belgium had to close one of its missions abroad. A mission in Persia was established in 1889 after an official visit of the Shah to Belgium. Finally, one must note that already in the 19th century Belgium was more active in expanding its representations abroad then reciprocally the receiving states would do in Belgium. A good example is China, which only opened its mission to Belgium in 1900, thirty four years after the first Belgian diplomatic presence in the Middle Empire.

Going into the 20th century, multilateral affairs gain prominence. The author calls his following third and fourth subsections “interbellum diplo-