BRITAIN AND THE BELGIAN EXILES 1940-1945

by Robert W. Allen, Jr.

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Abstract

Britain and the Belgian Exiles, 1940-1945

The main theme of this thesis is how the Belgian government under Prime Minister Hubert Pierlot redeemed its reputation with the British, as well as with its own citizens, during its four-year exile in London and its short tenure after Belgium was liberated in 1944. During this period, Pierlot and his government evolved from being an isolated and mistrusted neutral regime to being a valuable member of the Allied coalition against the Axis. The successful Anglo-Belgian partnership allowed Pierlot and his compatriots to have a small, but significant, part in the final Allied victory. The special British relationship with Belgium and the other small exiled Allies has been mostly overshadowed in general war and national histories, which have focused on the major powers or events centred on the homeland.

This examination of wartime Anglo-Belgian relations analyses the political, military, economic and social factors that affected the achievements and disappointments of a complex partnership at three levels: official (inter-government), military (inter-unit) and individual. Linking these interactions together explains Belgium's contributions to Allied victory and the British response to the unique challenge of hosting foreign governments in London and military units throughout Britain.

The first chapter shows how the Belgian leadership became discredited by late 1940 among the British, especially Winston Churchill. Chapters II through V analyse the initial period of exile, economic and military activities centred on the Belgian Congo (Pierlot's greatest asset), relations between the exiles and Belgium, and the build-up of military forces in Britain. Chapter VI covers the liberation of Belgium and Pierlot's struggle to meet the needs of his people and the Allied armies. The conclusion critiques the Anglo-Belgian partnership and highlights the benefits received by the two countries.

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Glossary

Part 1. Unpublished Reference Sources a. CAC: Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge. - CHAR: Chartwell Collection (WSC, 1884-1945 papers) b. CREH: Centre de Recherches et d'Études Historiques de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale (Brussels). Document series: - Serie E: Armée Belge. E3: Forces Belges Grand-Bretagne E4: Forces Belges Congo et Afrique du Sud - Serie L: Gouvernement de Londres. LA: Premier ministre & gouvernement en général LD: Affaires etrangères LC: Defense nationale LK: Belges à Londres LO: CEPAG LP: Instruction publique c. PRO: Public Record Office (Kew, London). Classes: ADM: Admiralty AIR: Air Ministry AVIA: Min. of Supply (also Min. Aircraft Production) BT: Ministry of Production BW: British Council CAB: War Cabinet DEFE 2: Defence (Combined Operations) FO: Foreign Office HO: Home Office MT: Ministry of Transport PREM: Prime Min. Office SUPP: Ministry of Supply (see also AVIA) T: Treasury WO: War Office. d. Univ. of London Senate House Belgian Collection - MS-800/II: Cammaerts Correspondence Part 2. Other Footnote/Bibliography Abbreviations and Acronyms *= Notionally listed ahead of this entry is one of these PRO acronyms from 1.c. above: ADM, AIR, CAB, FO, PREM, WO #= Notionally listed ahead of this entry is one of these military acronyms from 5 below: Bn, Bgde, Div, Regt, Sqdn ABTJ: Anglo-Belgian Trade Journal *AHB: Air Historical Branch (Air Ministry) Atch: Attached/ment BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation (London and elsewhere) BelgEmb(xx): Belgian Embassy to (GB, Great Britain) #BGIC: Belgian Government Information Center (NY) BI: Belgique Indépendante newspaper BIO: Belgian Information Office (London) #BritEmb(xx): British Embassy to (B, Belgium; CS, Czechoslovakia; N, Norway; NL, Netherlands; P, Portugal; US, United States) BPO: Belgian Parliamentary Office (London) CA: Civil Affairs *CCWRHBF: Central Committee for War Refugees from Holland, Belgium & France CinC: Commander-in-Chief Comm: Committee, Commission ConsGenl: Consul-General (mainly for commercial matters) COSSAC: Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander CRISP: Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politique (Brussels)

#EPW: Enemy Prisoner of War

ERM: European Resistance Movements

ETOUSA: European Theatre of Operations, United States Army

*FRPS: Foreign Research and Press Service (Oxford)

Govt.: Government

Gp(s): Group(s) (several RAF/US Army Air Forces squadrons)

HC: High Commissioner HMS: His/Her Majesty's Ship

HMSO: His/Her Majesty's Stationery Office

HQ: Headquarters

IAIC: Inter-Allied Information Committee (London)

JI: Joint Intelligence

LRC: London Reception Centre (for most wartime aliens)

MB: Moniteur Belge (published Belgian government decrees)

MEW: Ministry of Economic Warfare

MFA: (Usually Belgian) Ministry of Foreign Affairs

MI5: British counter-intelligence service MI9: British escape and evasion service

Min: Minister/Ministry
MinSt: Minister of State

- British: War Cabinet representative and political coordinator in key places such as Cairo

- Belgian: senior statesman designated by king

MM: Military Mission

MND: Minister/Ministry of National Defence (Belgium)

MOH: Ministry of Health

MOI: Ministry of Information

Msn: Mission

NAAFI: Navy Army Air Force Institute (service agency to British military)

NAF2SL: Naval Assistant (Foreign) to Second Sea Lord NethAmbGB: Netherlands Ambassador to Great Britain

NY: New York (City or state)

PAFA: Polish Air Force Association

*POW: Prisoner of War (usually enemy-held; EPW= enemy POW)

PWE: Political Warfare Executive (PRO class FO 898)

#RNB: Radiodiffusion Nationale Belge (London & Leopoldville)
Rpt: Report

SA: Union of South Africa

SABENA: Société Anonyme Belge d'Exploitation et de Navigation Aerienne (Belgian national airline)

SAS: Special Air Service (British army special paratroopers)

SCR: Service Centrale des Refugiés (London)

SHAEF: Supreme HQ Allied Expeditionary Force (N.W. Europe)

#S.R.&O.: Statutory Rules and Orders

TMs: Typed Manuscript

UKCC: United Kingdom (UK) Commercial Corporation (pre-emptive purchases of strategic goods against Axis)

UKCS: UK Civil Series (Second World War official histories)
UKMS: UK Military Series (also Second World War histories)
UNRRA: United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration

USGPO: United States Government Printing Office

*WSC: Winston Spencer Churchill

Part 3. Currency Exchange Rates (1940-45) £1= \$4.03= Congo/Belgian Franc 176.625

Part 4. British and Belgian Military Officer Ranks Navy Army Air Force P/O,F/O (Pilot/Flying Off) Ens (Ensign) Lt (Lieutenant) F/Lt (Flight Lt) Capt (Captain) Lt Cmdt (Commandant; used by the Belgians, but not the British) S/Ldr (Squadron Leader) LCdr (Lt Cmdr) W/Cdr (Wing Commander) Cdr (Commander Maj (Major) Cdr (Commander) Lt Col G/Capt (Group Capt) Col (Colonel) Capt Brigadier/General Air Commodore/Marshal Commodore/Admiral

- Part 5. Military Unit Information (approximate strengths)
 given only for perspective concerning unit activities
 maximum authorised given; actual strength often less
 -- 1940-4: Allied units grew stronger, German ones weakened
 Allied infantry usually motorised, Germans had many horses
 Abbreviations: Bn= Battalion; Bgde= Brigade; Div= Division;
 Regt= Regiment; Sqdn= Squadron
- Fusilier Battalion: 800 light infantry (Belgian)
 Commando/parachute troop: 100 (British/exile Allied)
- -- same strength as an infantry company or artillery battery
- b. Air Force (British)
- Fighter squadron: 16 aircraft 30 pilots, 170 support
- c. Navy (British)
- Corvette (Flower class): one 4-inch gun 85 crew
- Motor minesweeper (MMS): 1-2 machine guns 16-18 crew

Technical Data

- The following publications were used as guidelines for the text, footnotes and bibliography:
- Alston, R.C. "Notes, References, and Bibliographical Citations" London: University College London, 1993.
- Turabian, Kate L. A Manual for Writers, 6th ed. London: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- UCL History Department: "Recommended Conventions," "Commentary," Supplemental guide (Burk & French, 1996).

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Introduction

Horum omnium fortissimi sunt Belgae....proximique sunt Germanis, qui trans Rhenum incolunt, quibiscum continenter bellum gerunt.

"Of all these peoples the Belgae are the most courageous...because they are the nearest to the Germans dwelling beyond the Rhine, with whom they are continually at war."

Gaius Julius Caesar, The Gallic War¹

The famous Roman general wrote the words above 2,000 years before the Second World War. In the summer of 1940, few of the descendants of the Belgae fleeing from the Germans felt very courageous, and few of their hosts for their exile in Britain were as impressed with the Belgians as Caesar. Belgian refugees and their exiled government were also having trouble with their hosts during a less permanent stay in France during that difficult summer, when the aggressive Germans seemed to be continually winning in their war against much of Europe. By the end of June 1940, Marshal Henri Pétain's new French government had signed an armistice with the Germans. The governments of Britain and Belgium were sequestered in London and in Vichy respectively, feeling alone at a difficult time for their nations.

Five years later, the governments of Britain and Belgium were triumphant over the Third Reich after fighting together from London. The Belgians had played a small, but significant, part in the victory of the Allied coalition over the dictators of Germany and Italy. In the process, Belgium changed its security policy from being an independent neutral to being in a strong multinational alliance. At the same time, Britain drew closer to Europe and was more willing to be a leader in continental affairs during peace as well as war.

This thesis studies the evolution of relations between the Belgian and British governments during the five years in which they sought to turn tragedy into triumph. The government of Hubert Pierlot was at the nadir of its reputation with the British in the

¹ G. Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, trans. H.J. Edwards (Original, 1917; London: Heinemann, 1966), 1: 1. Part of this quote formed the Belgian 350 Squadron (Royal Air Force) motto 1941-6.

last half of 1940, and rose during its exile in Britain to a position of valued ally by the last half of 1944. No comprehensive study has been published on the wartime relations between the British and exiled governments in general, or between the British and Belgian ones in particular. General histories of the Second World War tend to concentrate on the major powers and their large-scale political, military and economic operations. More specific histories usually add national perspective to the above activities, as well as details about experiences of the native population, such as the Blitz, shortages and the fighting spirit inspired by Churchill in Britain, or the May 1940 campaign, resistance to the German occupation and the controversy over King Leopold III in Belgium.

This analysis seeks to fill an important gap left between the general and the national histories of the Second World War. The experiences of the Belgian government have enough in common with other exiled governments in Britain to serve also as a useful example of the accomplishments of the British in hosting several foreign governments, as well as showing the adjustments that the exiled leaders had to make in London. In like manner, civilian activities are added to the narrative to complement the better-known experiences of the minority of exiles who were in the military forces.³

The experience of exile broadened the perspective of both the Belgians and the British. This made possible a smooth relationship between the postliberation Belgian authorities and the Allied armies that made Belgium a logistics and operating base for campaigns against the Germans during the last several months of the war. Pierlot's government from September 1944 to February 1945 was in many

² Major Allied powers generally include Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, and sometimes France and Canada.

³ Only among Poles did the military (62,000) exceed the civilian (19,000) total. Belgians, Czechs, Norwegians and Dutch had a combined total of 24,000 military and 57,000 civilians. These figures include only those exile groups which created national military units in the UK (1940-45). Public Record Office (PRO), Home Office (HO) 213/588 (UK Alien Census, 31 Mar 44); PRO, Air Ministry (AIR) 2/8238 (Rpts 23 & 24, Oct-Dec 1942 & Jan-Mar 1943; DAFL 2, 21 Sep-20 Dec 42).

ways an extension of the exile experience, using agreements, relationships and personnel from the sojourn in London. The postliberation period of the Pierlot government therefore completes the evolution of the wartime Anglo-Belgian relationship. The period of Pierlot's final regime also shows the inevitable limitations of any exiled group that returns to its homeland after a long absence.

The first chapter provides the background necessary to understand how and why the Belgian leadership sank in reputation from the "brave little Belgium" of the First World War to the dubious "miserable ministers" of 1940. Prewar Belgian neutrality and minimal joint military cooperation alienated the British and French, making them more likely to blame the Belgians when things went wrong in the 1940 campaign against the German invaders. Staying in Vichy to supervise refugee repatriation from France seemed to be another misguided Belgian choice to the British, who wanted the Pierlot government to join them in London to continue fighting the Axis.

Chapter II begins with the Belgian premier and foreign minister starting a new life and a new foreign policy in London, with such handicaps as a diminished reputation, only four ministers, continued German bombing during the Blitz, and strong scepticism about their worth by Belgian Socialist and British leaders. Pierlot and Spaak warmed up the British with strong commitments to the Allied cause, and gained favour with their exiled compatriots by setting up a generous system of social services, labour exchanges and schools. Creating a new ground force was also a great challenge, due to limited manpower and weapons, as well as interference from royalists who wanted less Belgian involvement in the British war effort.

Chapter III analyses assistance to the Belgians from overseas, primarily the Belgian Congo and the United States. The Congo provided gold and other products to fund the Belgian war effort, as well as being the main focus of Belgo-American relations and agreements. The huge colony was difficult to deal with because of its physical distance from Britain and the United States. Another obstacle was the philosophical distance between the dominant

companies in the Congo concerned primarily with profits and the Anglo-American agencies concerned primarily with victory. On the other hand, Belgian patriotism was strong there, as shown by the Congo's eager dispatch of troops to eastern and northern Africa. A small merchant marine and a few aviators in the South African Air Force added more overseas Belgians to the Allied war effort.

Having consolidated its position in Britain by 1942, the Belgian government started to increase its contacts with other exiled governments and its homeland, as shown in Chapter IV. Ties with the Dutch in particular became stronger, but there were some lengthy policy clashes with the British over getting food through the blockade and over controlling the flow of information between Britain and Belgium. As links to the Resistance grew, subversion of German and collaborator activities became more organised and more effective in helping the Allied cause.

Chapter V analyses the continued improvement in size and capability of the Belgian air, ground and naval units in Britain from 1941 to 1944. Other exile forces are examined, as are the general features of Allied military recruiting and agreements with the British. By mid-1944, the Belgians had a brigade group, two fighter squadrons, several small warships, and two special ground units; these were enough to restore national military honour and to provide nuclei for postwar forces.

The rapid Allied advance from Normandy to Brussels, which included the small Belgian forces, constitutes the first part of Chapter VI. The rest of the chapter examines the postliberation efforts of a new Pierlot government in implementing agreements with the Allies and national plans made while in exile. The problems and shortages that arose after nearly five months proved to be too difficult for leaders who had been unable to share personally their nation's experiences during over four years of exile. This study of the Anglo-Belgian wartime relationship between governments ends with the replacement in February 1945 of Pierlot's last cabinet by men whose political ideas had matured in occupied Belgium rather than in

London.

The conclusion of this thesis reviews the evolution of Anglo-Belgian relations under Pierlot, who also had to uphold Belgian national interests as best he could. The significance of British actions in hosting the exiles and the effect of the Anglo-Belgian partnership on the Allied war effort is assessed in the final part of this chapter. In the short term, the military contribution of the exiles was more of a bonus than a vital ingredient to the British war effort. Without the help of the American and Soviet military forces, it is very doubtful if Britain and the exile governments could have defeated the Axis. On the other hand, sheltering the exiles provided the British useful political credibility in Europe and North America, as well as economic resources that assisted London's war effort.

In the specific case of the British and Belgian governments, the exile experience created a more appreciative and cosmopolitan attitude that made bonds between the two countries stronger after the Second World War than they were before 1940. These bonds became part of the foundation for a more secure western Europe, and should be appreciated as a major achievement of the Churchill and Pierlot governments.

Chapter I: Defeat and Confusion, 1940

Belgium is a small country dominated by two factors. The first is Belgium's position at a strategic crossroads between traditional enemies France and Germany, which has often brought the scourge of other nations' wars to Belgian soil when its neighbours were fighting. Its location on the North Sea opposite southern England has also made Belgium's fate and political intentions an important factor in British concerns about maritime threats and the balance of power in Europe. The second factor is Belgium's position astride the ancient Road of Brunehaut through the old territory of the Belgae tribes linking Roman settlements near present-day Cologne, Maastricht and Boulogne. The fifth-century migration of the Germanic Franks stayed to the north of the road and a large forest, while the romanised Celtic Wala stayed to the south.1 Thus was created the cultural divide between today's Flemings and Walloons. It is the great internal obstacle to Belgium's peaceful unity, as well as being the motivation for a strong monarchy and a complex system of compromises.

The king had a critical role in representing and maintaining national unity, standing above cultural and social conflict. He also provided a sense of continuity and respect in the midst of fractious Belgian politics, where most governments were short-lived and based on temporary compromise among two or three major parties. Among the enhanced powers for unity given the king in the Belgian constitution was the command of the army in fact as well as in spirit.² These aspects of Belgian life created political processes quite different from those of neighbouring countries, and must be remembered in

¹ Marc Schreiber, *Belgium*, trans. Hilda Becker (London: MacDonald, 1945), 26.

² Vernon Mallinson, Belgium (London: E. Benn, 1969), 102-6; E. Ramon Arango, Leopold III and the Belgian Royal Question (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1961), 9, 20. Average Belgian government tenure during the 1920s was 19 months; this declined to only 7 months from 1931-40. Jane Miller, Belgian Foreign Policy Between Two Wars 1919-40 (New York (NY): Bookman, 1951), 291-9.

analysing the 1940 crisis between Belgium's king and government that preceded the latter's exile in Britain.

The great external obstacle to Belgium's national peace, its position as a convenient invasion route between France and Germany, shaped Belgium's traditional anxiety about national security and its mandated neutrality until the First World War. Modern Belgium was created in 1839 by Britain, France, Prussia, Russia and Austria as a neutral barrier to contain French aggression and keep equilibrium in the balance of power. Neutrality failed to prevent German invasion and occupation during the First World War, so Belgium sought alliances in the 1920s with its former cobelligerents. The insular British were not interested in a peacetime Continental commitment, but the French were willing to sign a military agreement in 1920 as a way to outflank a possible German threat. By the mid-1930s, Belgium's hope for security through its membership in the League of Nations and guarantees from its neighbours in the 1925 Locarno Pact began to wane in the face of aggressive fascist dictators and Anglo-French weakness. The League's inability to stop Italian aggression in Abyssinia in 1935 and the Flemings' growing resentment of condescending French attitudes towards the Franco-Belgian Military Agreement meant that Belgian foreign and defence policies needed to change.3

Part 1. An Independent Defence

In 1936, Belgium changed its foreign policy from reliance on France to an ambiguous position based on neutrality, strong defences and independence from foreign obligations. International and national factors led to this change that was endorsed by most Belgian leaders, but remained most closely identified with King Leopold III. Belgian aloofness frustrated the British, angered the French and pleased the Germans. Most important for the Belgians, it united

³ Robert Rothstein, Alliances and Small Powers (NY: Columbia University Press, 1968), 53, 63-5, 82, 89. Miller, Two Wars, 212, 215; David Kieft, Belgium's Return to Neutrality (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 6, 10, 17, 19.

Flemings and Walloons behind big increases in defence spending. It was also compatible with the preferences of the small countries who were members in the neutral Oslo Group with Belgium. While Belgium's choice of neutrality may seem like a futile attempt to be "eaten last" by Germany when viewed from the perspective of the overwhelming German victories of 1940, in 1936 it was a rational and popular move that sought to emulate the undisturbed 125-year neutrality of the Netherlands and Switzerland.

Two crises early in 1936 provided the impetus for a major shift in Belgium's foreign policy of relying on France. The first crisis was the February defeat of a defence bill to improve the Belgian army and border fortifications; Flemish perceptions of excessive French influence in military matters made their representatives reluctant to increase funds. Their doubts about Belgian military ties with France seemed to be justified by the second crisis a month later, when German troops marched unopposed into the demilitarised zone on the west bank of the Rhine River. Italy, Britain and France provided little or no opposition to Hitler's first test of European resolve, which discredited the Locarno Pact that had guaranteed Belgium's borders. When Belgian Prime Minister Paul Van Zeeland met the foreign ministers of Italy, France and Britain in mid-1936, he failed to get international action to help him deal with the new German menace that had moved up to his frontier.4

The conflicting views of the Catholic, Liberal and Socialist parties stifled Belgian progress on the defence issue until King Leopold III rallied his tripartite cabinet on 14 October 1936 around the concept of an independent defence. It was the only policy agreeable enough to the bickering politicians for them to support increasing Belgian defences in response to the German threat. Independent defence was widely supported in Belgium, but not in France. The latter was extremely irritated at the loss of its 16-

⁴ Rothstein, Alliances, 107-10; Mallinson, Belgium, 105-6.

year military agreement with Belgium. 5 Germany, Italy and the Netherlands approved; the latter and Switzerland were considered in Brussels as successful models for the new Belgian policy. British opinion was mixed; the government acquiesced with the Belgian action, but Winston Churchill disliked it intensely. Noting the huge Anglo-French losses in Flanders on behalf of the Belgians during the Great War, he voiced concern about a solitary Belgium being easily overrun to provide enemy airfields close to Britain. The future British prime minister developed a long-term grudge toward the Belgian leadership because of what he considered to be a dangerous and ungrateful shift in their policy. On the other hand, Leopold summed up his nation's prevailing opinion well in his famous cabinet speech by saying, "Our military policy, like our foreign policy, on which it is based, must aim, not at preparing for more or less successful war with the aid of a coalition, but at keeping war away from our territory."6

Links with Britain and France were not completely severed by Belgium's new policy, as indicated by the Anglo-French declaration of 24 April 1937. Belgium was released from its Locarno Pact obligations to help France or Germany if one was attacked by the other, but British and French troops were still pledged to help Belgium if Germany invaded it. The latter promised six months later not to invade Belgium unless it joined military action against Germany. Belgium was therefore still "guaranteed" by its powerful neighbours in spite of a revised foreign policy. To keep its options open as an armed neutral, Belgium continued to send some information to the French and British military attachés to help planning for

⁵ David Kieft, *Neutrality*, 84, 136-9, 143, 162. British unwillingness in 1936 to make a firm commitment to sending a large expeditionary force in case of renewed war in western Europe meant that there might be no reinforcements sent to France. After the Rhineland incident and 16 years of French condescension, Belgium was no longer willing to base her security on France alone.

 $^{^6}$ Winston S. Churchill (WSC), Churchill Archive Centre, Chartwell (CHAR) 9/121 (WSC at Aldersbrook, 16 Oct 36); Miller, Two Wars, 228.

possible assistance against Germany.7

Belgium also sought support from other neutrals while it was rearming. The Oslo Group was an economic association of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Belgium that had been formed in 1930. These nations also consulted each other on political issues affecting trade, calling for peaceful solutions to the problems caused by the worldwide economic depression, high tariff barriers and fascist aggression. It was during an Oslo Group meeting in August 1939 that King Leopold III issued a peace appeal on the group's behalf. This was followed a few days later by a joint offer from Leopold and Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands to act as mediators among Germany, Italy, France, Britain and Poland, which were drifting toward war because of Hitler's aggressive actions. Unfortunately, making wishful appeals was as far as the Dutch wanted to go in joint defence actions with the Belgians.

Belgium worked hard to stiffen its defences between 1936 and 1939. When Britain and France declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939, after Hitler's forces invaded Poland, Belgium was spending 24 percent of its national budget on defence. Its regular and reserve military strength was 600,000, over half of the male population between 20 and 40. Belgium was in an exposed position, with France and Britain inadequately armed and uncertain about the details of coming to Belgium's rescue. Each of the three countries could see war coming because of Hitler's unchecked aggression, but staying individually behind their borders could not help them avoid a

⁷ Brian Bond, Britain, France and Belgium 1939-1940 (London: Brassey's, 1990), 9-10; (Belgian) Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Belgium: the Official Account of What Happened 1939-1940 (London: Evans Bros., 1941), 4-6, 67.

⁸ Wilfried Wagner, Belgien in der deutschen Politik während des Zweiten Weltkrieges (Boppard am Rhein, Deutschland: Harald Boldt, 1974), 41-3. The Dutch were willing to sign a customs agreement with the Belgium-Luxembourg Economic Union, but they were not even ready for military staff talks in 1939-40. PRO, Foreign Office (FO) 425/422: C3925 (FO (Research Dept), 28 Sep 44).

⁹ Roger Keyes, Outrageous Fortune: The Tragedy of Leopold III of the Belgians 1901-1941 (London: Sacker & Warburg, 1984), 75, 109.

conflict with Germany.

The beginning of war among their neighbours caused Belgians to unite around a government of national unity under Prime Minister
Hubert Pierlot in September 1939. All three of the political parties in the coalition supported continuation of the armed neutrality policy started in 1936. A united front with Britain and France found little support in Belgium, and formal military staff talks with the Allies were refused. Low-level contacts at the attaché level were kept, however, and sufficient information on Belgian roads and defensive positions was given to the French for development of Allied (Anglo-French) options to advance to either the Dyle (Plan D) or Escaut/Scheldt (Plan E) Rivers in case the Belgians requested help after a German invasion. 10

In the meantime, more Belgian reservists were mobilised to strengthen the army. 12 of the army's 22 divisions were regular troops, mostly infantry. All ten of the reserve divisions were infantry, over half of them second-line units with less armament and training. Belgian military doctrine was strictly defensive, so armoured divisions and independent air force units were not established. The tiny navy of coastal craft and minesweepers was, as part of the army, also defensive. Small numbers of anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns were added to infantry division inventories, but the Belgians expected their fortresses and Anglo-French air power to be the critical ingredient in blunting a German attack. The static military strategy of the Belgian army was better prepared to refight the First World War than to defeat the combined aircraft and tank attacks of the new German blitzkrieg. It was even more unfortunate that the Anglo-French armed forces on which Belgium relied were also

The unity government of 5 Sep 39 was Pierlot's third cabinet. Serious bickering among the Catholic, Socialist and Liberal parties caused cabinet changes four months later. Half of the ministers in Pierlot IV (5 Jan 40-19 Sep 44) would form the exiled government in London. Jean-Michel De Waele, "De Pierlot I à Pierlot IV," Jours de Guerre, Francis Balace, ed. (Charleroi, Belgique: Crédit Communal, 1990), 9-19. FO 898/230: 4, 7. James Butler, Grand Strategy, vol. 2: September 1939-June 1941 (London: HMSO, 1957), 157, 160-3.

ill-prepared for mechanised mobile warfare. 11

After conquering Poland in September 1939, German forces moved to their western and northern frontiers to prepare for more attacks. Little fighting occurred during the winter while Britain and France waited nervously behind their defences during what some called the Phoney War. One incident during this period caused a lot of excitement because it indicated Germany was definitely planning an attack to the west. Two German officers in a small aircraft got lost and crash-landed near Mechelen, Belgium on 10 January 1940. Secret papers detailing a German attack on the Low Countries were recovered by the Belgians, but the latter were unsure whether the plans were genuine. 12

King Leopold III discreetly asked the British about the possibility of Allied troop entry into Belgium. The Allies responded by moving troops up to the Belgian border, thinking that the king was ready to invite them to take up their preplanned defensive positions. The Belgian government was unpleasantly surprised by both the king's independent action and the assertive Allied response. Prime Minister Pierlot felt that Allied entry into Belgium would provide Germany with a useful excuse to attack as soon as possible, and he forced an embarrassed Leopold to thank the angry Allies for their efforts while telling them not to cross the frontier. Instead of moving Belgium firmly into the Allied ranks to face an inevitable German attack, this incident produced hard feelings inside and outside Belgium. It also highlighted the serious communication problem between the young

¹¹ MFA, Official, 18, 99-100; Keyes, Outrageous, 110; Andrew Mollo, The Armed Forces of World War II: Uniforms, Insignia and Organisation (London: Orbis, 1981), 46-7.

¹² The Germans called the inactive Sept 1939-Apr 1940 period Sitzkrieg. Derrik Mercer, ed., Chronicle of the Second World War (London: Chronicle, 1990), 33. In Jan 1940, the Belgians still felt that the Germans would not attack them. British and French generals also doubted that the plans were genuine. Bond, Britain, France and Belgium, 35-7; FO 800/309: 45 (Halifax to George VI, 9 Oct 39).

headstrong king and his cautious prime minister.13

With the king's support, Allied officers in civilian clothes were able to make increased visits to proposed Allied defence lines and airfields during the spring of 1940. Both Britain and France sent long questionnaires on military and political topics to their attachés in Brussels. Allied planning was made even more difficult by the lack of written Belgian replies and poor coordination between the British and French.¹⁴

The Belgians were not the only neutrals that were frustrating the Allies. The Dutch, unlike the Belgians, had not been invaded by the Germans in World War I, so their trust in neutrality was even more entrenched. Their army of 400,000 had a lower level of armament and motivation than the Belgians, and the air components of the army and navy were hopelessly obsolete. Dutch military coordination with Belgium was quite limited, making it impossible to modify the two countries' divergent strategies of retreat from German invaders into a mutually-supportive plan. 15 Allied assistance plans were also thwarted by stubborn neutrals to the north when Norway and Sweden refused passage to an Anglo-French force attempting to reinforce Finland in March 1940 against Russian invaders. 16

After the German invasion of Norway and Denmark in April 1940, Britain and France once again asked Belgium to allow Allied troops to

¹³ FO 371/24277: C896 (W.M.(40) 15th Conclusions, 16 Jan 40);
Paul Reynaud, In the Thick of the Fight 1930-45, trans. J. Lambert
(London: Cassell, 1955), 249, 252; Hubert Pierlot, "Pages
d'histoire," Le Soir (Bruxelles), 8-9 July 1947.

¹⁴ Livre blanc 1936-46 (Luxembourg: Secrétariat du Roi, 1946),
33; War Office (WO) 208/88: 1A & 43A (Between WO and Military
Attaché, 19 Jan & 9 Apr 40).

¹⁵ Plans to retreat into the Amsterdam-Rotterdam and Antwerp-Ghent redoubts left a gap of over 40 miles between the Dutch and Belgian forces respectively. German attacks in 1940 took advantage of this gap, as predicted by the WO. FO 371/24273: C5230 (Intelligence Commentary, 4 Apr 40); WO 208/2041: 1A (WO(MI3), 7 Jun 39); Robert den Boeft, "The Dutch Armed Forces in Exile," Holland at War Against Hitler: Anglo-Dutch Relations 1940-1945, M.R.D. Foot, ed. (London: Frank Cass, 1990), 35-9.

¹⁶ Norway and Sweden felt that they would be invaded like Poland if they angered Hitler or Stalin. Llewellyn Woodward, British Foreign Policy in the Second World War (London: HMSO, 1962), 19-21, 27.

enter and take positions in their planned defensive line. Ever fearful of a German pre-emptive strike, Belgium once again refused as the Senate gave "independence-neutrality" overwhelming approval. Thus the last chance for full Allied-Belgian cooperation and the orderly positioning of Anglo-French troops was discarded as the Wehrmacht massed divisions and squadrons on Germany's western frontier.

Part 2. Invasion and Retreat

Germany's attack against the Low Countries was not unexpected, but the intensity and strategy of the invasion shocked Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg. The last-named was overrun in a few hours, the Dutch were crushed in five days and the Belgians finally yielded after 18 days of fierce fighting across their country. The French and British units sent in to help at Brussels' request were also badly mauled by the German armies, but most were able to escape through Dunkirk. Among the Allied debris on the beaches around that battered port were the discredited ideas of Belgian neutrality and a combined king-commander, as well as relying on static defences against massed tank and aircraft attacks.

When German forces crashed across the eastern frontiers of Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg early on 10 May 1940, they were 60 percent larger than the highest Allied estimate. The location of the main thrust of the attack had changed to the Ardennes from the centre of Belgium, differing from the more traditional Schlieffen Plan of the First World War and the plan captured in January 1940. The hilly, wooded Ardennes covering the frontier between Belgium and

¹⁷ Mallinson, Belgium, 112; Livre blanc, 41.

¹⁸ L.F. Ellis, The War in France and Flanders 1939-40 (London: HMSO, 1953), 342; WO 208/2041: 1A (WO(MI3), 7 Jun 39). Hitler was determined to avoid the deadly stalemate on the Western Front that he had experienced as a soldier 1914-8. The Mechelen incident (Jan 1940) helped him to overcome his general staff's resistance to the Ardennes plan. John Toland, Adolf Hitler (NY: Ballantine, 1976), 818-9, 825-6.

Luxembourg had been deemed unsuitable for large tank formations by most Allied and German generals, and its defence had therefore been assigned to the relatively weak and underequipped French Ninth Army. This army held the 50 miles between Namur and Sedan with nine divisions, while the French Second Army to the south held a 40-mile front with seven divisions. At Sedan, the critical junction between the two armies, the main thrust of German Army Group A with 44 divisions split the Allied armies only a few days after starting their invasion. The seven panzer divisions in the vanguard of this task force then raced across northern France and reached the coast at Abbeville on 20 May. In less than two weeks, dozens of Belgian, British and French divisions were cut off from almost all supplies and reinforcements from France.¹⁹ This would have disastrous consequences for the defenders on both sides of the German advance.

Meanwhile, Belgium had called on 10 May for Allied help and quickly received it. The Belgians had also asked for other guarantees given in the First World War, but these were given only in modified form by the cautious British and French. The latter already recognised that strategic and political factors had to be different in this conflict than they were before, so the changed response included a refusal to guarantee the neutrality of the Belgian Congo. This showed another difference in Anglo-French and Belgian expectations on the suitability of neutrality at that time, but it did not mar the joy of Belgium's parliament at the rapid Anglo-French advance into prepared Belgian defences.²⁰

As planned, the Belgians were joined by the British

¹⁹ The Germans advanced with little effective opposition, due to lack of a French strategic reserve to counter enemy breakthroughs. Also, most French tanks and aircraft were scattered in small units instead of strong formations, such as the German panzer groups and air fleets. Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, ed. Denis Kelly (London: Penguin, 1989), 243, 249; Ellis, *Flanders*, 38, 342.

The harsh lessons of the Treaty of Versailles and the Great Depression caused Britain to avoid grandiose promises on postwar indemnities, economic assistance and full integrity of frontiers. FO 371/24273: C6883 (BelgEmbGB, FO (Ward), 10 May 40); /24278: C6688 (Oliphant to FO, 10 May 40), C6691 (FO (Ward), 10 May 40).

Expeditionary Force (BEF) and the French Seventh and First Armies. Even though the defenders outnumbered German Army Group B, they were hindered by poor communications among multinational commands and by inferior use of tanks and aircraft. Not only were most Belgian and Dutch aircraft destroyed on the ground by the German Luftwaffe during the first day of invasion, but the unprecedented use of glider-borne soldiers and paratroopers led to the capture of powerful Fort Eben-Emael in the heart of Belgium's eastern defence line in only one day. 21 As Belgian troops moved back from their eastern defences around Liège and along the Albert Canal, the British settled into their Plan D positions along the Dyle River between Louvain and Wavre. The French were dug in between Wavre and the French border, while the Belgians were assigned to Namur and the front between Antwerp and Louvain. French troops of the Seventh Army on the Allied left wing moved north in a vain attempt to shore up the Dutch. Anglo-French force in Belgium, which had some of the strongest Allied units in it, inflicted heavy losses on its German opponents. The Belgian artillery and the two elite Chasseurs Ardennais divisions of motorised infantry also fought especially well; the latter remained the most effective Belgian divisions throughout the battle for their country.22

The puncturing of French defences to the south at Sedan and the collapse of the Dutch to the north forced a withdrawal on 16 May of Allied-Belgian forces from their strong positions between Antwerp and Namur to a weaker line along the Scheldt River to avoid being outflanked. It was a painful move for King Leopold III, since it exposed Antwerp, Brussels and Namur to German occupation and left only the western third of Belgium as free territory. It complicated

²¹ Churchill, War, 239-40; William Shirer, The Collapse of the Third Republic (NY: Pocket Books, 1971), 610-6. Other Belgian forts were more useful in tying up German attackers, many of them holding out for a week or more. MFA, Official, 33-4, 40.

²² Fernand Van Langenhove, La Belgique et ses garants: L'été 1940 (Bruxelles: Palais des Académies, 1972), 15; Bernard Crochet, "Les combats heroïques des chasseurs ardennais,"39-45 no. 60 (1991): 14-6.

his logistics support as well, since only one railroad from the coast was left to bring supplies to his army.²³ The westward advance of the Germans in northern France was also wreaking havoc with Anglo-French supply lines, adding one more handicap for the northern group of defenders to overcome.

Another handicap for the Allied-Belgian armies was their toplevel command and control. All of their troops had been brought under General Billotte of France on 12 May, but a lack of communications and professional confidence among the commanders made their military movements disjointed. It was therefore not surprising that their proposed counterattack against both flanks of the German advance in northern France unravelled on 22 May. By this time, frustrated commanders were blaming other national armies for their problems. For example, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes, Churchill's personal liaison officer to King Leopold III, had to defend British assistance against complaints by the Belgian General Staff by reminding them of how the BEF had kept to the planned intervention schedule on short notice in spite of incomplete information from the Belgians. It was harder to appease critics of the lack of Royal Air Force protection needed to counter Luftwaffe dive-bombing and strafing, as combat losses and the seizure of nearby airfields by the Germans reduced Allied air strength over the battlefields in Belgium and France.24 A so-called enemy "Fifth Column" received exaggerated blame in the press for the magnitude of Allied-Belgian problems. A few small groups of German agents disguised as refugees did seize some small objectives such as bridges, but their military impact was very small. However, they caused sufficient confusion and damage to start wild rumours in England soon afterwards, which inflated British fears of spies and

²³ Arango, Question, 51-2; Keyes, Outrageous, 472.

 $^{^{24}}$ Ellis, Flanders, 42, 105, 116-7; Keyes, Outrageous, 300. Known in Britain and Belgium for his First World War bravery, and with keen military and political skills, Keyes was an effective liaison. Prime Minister's Office (PREM) 4/24/2: 117-8 (Keyes to WSC, 14 May 40).

saboteurs among the refugees who fled across the English Channel.²⁵

The manoeuvres to prepare for the counterattack mentioned above highlighted the weakness of the Allied-Belgian position. As the Belgian Army had neither the equipment nor training for a large offensive, King Leopold III agreed to replace British divisions attacking south with Belgian defenders. On 22 May, he moved to new positions on the Lys River, losing more troops on the march to German attacks and the disintegration of ravaged units in the demoralising confusion of retreat. With their better tactics, organisation and reconnaissance, the Germans took full advantage of the overextended Belgian lines and attacked in force on 24 May. The British divisions intended for a southward attack had to rush back to stave off disaster from this German advance. This saved the northern British flank, but gave the French an excuse to blame the BEF for the failure of the planned Allied counterattack.²⁶ It was obvious that the Allied-Belgian campaign was floundering in Flanders.

The French, British and Belgian governments had monitored the retreat of their armies with growing concern. French Premier Paul Reynaud, who had opposed advancing into Belgium on short notice, called Churchill on 15 May to say that France was already beaten because of the massive German breach of the defensive line at Sedan. The British War Office authorised the BEF commander, General Lord Gort, to start evacuating non-essential troops to Britain as early as 20 May.²⁷ Differences between Prime Minister Pierlot and King Leopold III on the best strategy for retreat and the future of the monarch-commander had already surfaced on 16 May. The king wanted to move northwest towards the national redoubt and remain with his army no matter what happened, while Pierlot emphasised going west and

²⁵ Louis de Jong, The German Fifth Column in the Second World War (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956), 95-8, 196-8.

²⁶ Ellis, Flanders, 105, 107, 148; Keyes, Outrageous, 293, 300, 304.

 $^{^{27}}$ Reynaud, Thick, 244; Churchill, War, 242; Ellis, Flanders, 178.

south to maintain contact with the Allied forces. Pierlot also stressed that Leopold's duty as head of state took precedence over being head of the army, so the king must avoid capture in order to continue leading the Belgian cause against the invader. Battlefield events during the next week prompted the movements of Leopold's troops, but the special Belgian problem of their monarch being an active commander and head of state continued to fester.

By 25 May, the British, Belgian and French armies were squeezed into a corner astride the Franco-Belgian border by the combined superior forces of German Army Groups A and B. The British military mission to Belgian Army headquarters relayed Leopold's appeal to Lord Gort for more British troops and air cover to help the battered Belgians. British inability to seal the gap between the BEF and the exhausted Belgians demoralised King Leopold III and his staff. Furthermore, the king's staff predicted that a westward retreat to the Yser River would cause great loss of life and supplies, shattering the fragile cohesion of the surviving Belgian units while inflicting no damage on the Germans.²⁹ Belgium's leaders faced some very difficult choices.

Part 3. Rupture and Repercussions

In the process of physically splitting the Allies and Belgians with their armoured vanguard, the Germans also split their opponents' leadership. Belgium's king and prime minister separated, choosing different ways to protect their country; each would face repercussions from their compatriots. Within two months after the German invasion started on 10 May 1940, Britain and France had new premiers and commanders-in-chief. Of these leaders, only Winston Churchill could justify the term "finest hour" in describing his country's redemption in 1940 after heavy losses to the seemingly

²⁸ Pierlot, "Pages," 10 Jul 47.

 $^{^{29}}$ PREM 4/24/4: 193, 205 (Keyes, 26 & 28 May 40); Ellis, Flanders, 177.

It was under these trying conditions that Leopold had his last fateful meeting with the four ministers he had asked to remain as his advisors in Belgium. At the chateau of Wynandaele near Bruges on 25 May, the king met for over six hours with Prime Minister Pierlot, Foreign Minister Paul-Henri Spaak and the Ministers of National Defence and Interior. The king told them that he had made the painful decision to share the fate of his army. When all four ministers protested that the head of state must fight on, even from outside Belgium, Leopold stated that leaving his army would be a desertion that would cause a rapid collapse of Belgian morale and endanger all the defending armies in Belgium. He permitted his ministers to leave if they wanted, but he said that the war was over for Belgium and that he could not support a government that would not join him in ending death and destruction for his country. His saddened ministers left Belgium that day, determined to continue fighting for Belgium from France.31

King Leopold III felt that he owed an explanation of his controversial choice to the British because of their strong support against Germany, so he wrote a letter to his friend King George VI detailing his reasons for the decision:

Whatever trials Belgium may have to face in the future, I am convinced that I can help my people better by remaining with them... especially with regard to the hardships of foreign occupation, the menace of forced labour or deportation, and the difficulties of food supply....my utmost concern will be to prevent my countrymen from being compelled to associate themselves with any action against the countries which have attempted to help Belgium in her plight.... 32

³⁰ Churchill and Dill replaced Chamberlain and Ironside in Britain, while Pétain and Weygand replaced Reynaud and Gamelin in France. Mercer, *Chronicle*, 83-103.

³¹ In refusing to leave his army and country, King Leopold III followed his father's example. Luckily for King Albert in 1914, his army had been able to cling to a small piece of Belgium around Ypres; the government moved to France. Pierlot, "Pages," 13 Jul 47; Livre blanc, 104-5; Jakob Huizinga, Mr. Europe: A Political Biography of Paul-Henri Spaak (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961), 121, 131-2.

 $^{^{32}}$ PREM 4/24/4: 156-7 (Leopold III to George VI, 25 May 40).

Leopold thought that he could play a meaningful part in Belgian national life under a moderate German occupation, as indicated by his indirect request on 26 May for the resignation of all government ministers and a blanket approval to form a new government in the future. Since this would have placed all future Belgian government executives under German or collaborator supervision, the ministers unanimously rejected both requests at a special meeting in Paris.³³

Meanwhile, Belgian government leaders sought all the help available to get their king to change his mind. In London, Finance Minister Camille Gutt and Ambassador Emile de Cartier de Marchienne, knowing of Leopold's reluctance to leave Belgium, had asked the Foreign Office on 24 May to put pressure on the stubborn king through Admiral Keyes. London responded quickly, notifying King Leopold III that two motor torpedo boats would be ready at Ostend to evacuate him and his remaining ministers as soon as the military situation required it. King George VI also urged his fellow monarch to flee when further fighting was useless, stating that the Germans would not be likely to let him act as an unrestricted rallying point for the Belgian people. As Pierlot and Spaak came through London after leaving Leopold and Belgium on 25 May, they added more pleas for help. Even the combative French Premier Paul Reynaud was approached in Paris to join the effort to change the Belgian king's mind. Second

Nothing could change Leopold's decision, and he told his weary army on 25 May of his intention to stay with them. He had resigned himself to defeat and capture after his staff had concluded that

³³ The documents to be signed by the ministers that would allow Leopold to govern in occupied Belgium actually came from the queen mother's staff. Van Langenhove, *Garants*, 22; Henri-François van Aal, *Télémemoires: de Vleeschauwer-Gutt-Spaak* (Bruxelles: Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politique (CRISP), 1971), 75.

³⁴ Albert Boelaerts, ed., "Archives Secrètes de l'ambassade de Belgique à Londres: Au sujet des evenements de mai-octobre 1940" (Belgian Embassy (London), n.d.), 25-9; PREM 4/24/2: 78-9 & 87 (FO to Prime Minister, 24 May 40 & George VI to Leopold III, 26 May 40).

³⁵ Camille Gutt, La Belgique au carrefour 1940-44 (Paris: Fayard, 1971), 28; PREM 4/24/2: 77 (Churchill to Leopold III, 26 May 40); van Langenhove, Garants, 23.

disaster would result from either German forces attacking his flank and rear, or from his own units dissolving under air attack during a retreat. King Leopold III had warned the British as early as 20 May that if their two armies separated, the Belgian Army would have to surrender. On 26 May, he told the French military mission at his headquarters that he would carry on fighting behind his defensive line of 2000 railroad cars between Roulers and Ypres, but that he had nearly reached the limit of his endurance. The British were also warned that day, and the next morning they were told that the Belgian Army's situation was so desperate that surrender must come soon.

The Germans broke through the Belgian lines in three places on 27 May, so the king requested possible terms of surrender that afternoon to avoid further loss of life during hopeless resistance. He was concerned about both the troops in his army and the three million civilians crammed into the unoccupied part of western Flanders. Many of the homeless refugees were easy targets on the congested roads, and food, water and supplies were scarce for everyone behind the Belgian lines. King Leopold III capitulated early in the morning of 28 May, removing a major barrier between the Germans, the Allied armies and the North Sea coast only 20 miles away.³⁸

Anglo-French reactions to the king's capitulation were angry and swift. Lord Gort finally learned about the cease-fire a few hours before it was to start. He was extremely concerned about the Germans passing through the Belgian positions to attack his BEF units enroute to Dunkirk for evacuation. Operation Dynamo, to return the BEF to Britain, had been ordered by the War Office two days before;

 $^{^{36}}$ PREM 4/24/4: 193, 205 (Keyes, 26 & 28 May 40); MFA, Official, 45; Keyes, Outrageous, 342.

³⁷ MFA, Official, 46-9; Keyes, Outrageous, 343, 473; FO 371 /24278: C6994 (FO (Ward), 11 Jun 40), C7927 (Keyes, 10-18 May 40).

³⁸ MFA, Official, 48-50; Keyes, Outrageous, 323, 473. German pressure on Leopold was increased when they shut off much of Flanders' water supply with master controls in occupied Brussels. FO 371/24276: C8317 (Pope-Hallet, 7 Aug 40).

King Leopold III had not been told of this decision.³⁹ What effect knowing British intentions would have had on the timing and content of the king's actions is uncertain. What is certain, however, is that because of poor communications among the top Allied and Belgian commanders, all of them share the blame for the military tragedy of May 1940.

Churchill's initial public reaction was restrained due to

Admiral Keyes' firm defence of King Leopold's conduct. In a speech
to the House of Commons, the prime minister was moderate and
diplomatic:

....I have no intention of suggesting to the House that we should attempt at this moment to pass judgement upon the action of the King of the Belgians in his capacity as commander-inchief of the Belgian Army. This army has fought very bravely and has both suffered and inflicted heavy losses...."

Premier Reynaud of France was extremely angry, and summoned Pierlot to his office in Paris late on 27 May after learning of King Leopold III's request for surrender terms. It was the first time Pierlot had heard of the king's action, and he reassured Reynaud that the Belgian government would continue fighting the Germans alongside the Allies. The Belgian prime minister then asked how much support his government could count on from France. Reynaud replied that he would think about it and let him know. Early the next morning, Reynaud told Pierlot that he should show maximum solidarity with the Allies by an appropriate speech with a call for the conscription of all Belgians of military age. Reynaud's broadcast later in the morning of 28 May blamed the Belgian Army for losing the campaign in Flanders, and attacked Leopold for treacherously surrendering without warning those who had come to his aid. The French working classes in particular reacted in anger to this speech by insulting and even

³⁹ Leopold sent three messages to Gort about his serious situation; only the last one announcing his request for an armistice did not reach Gort. Ellis, *Flanders*, 182, 198-9; Keyes, *Outrageous* 343, 349.

 $^{^{40}}$ FO 371/24276: C8432 (House of Commons debates, 28 May 40); Boelaerts, "Archives," 39, 41.

assaulting many of the two million Belgian refugees in France. 41

Pierlot was upset about the harshness of Reynaud's speech, especially since it prejudiced Frenchmen even more against Belgians. He tried to salvage the situation for his government and his refugees. After coordinating and changing his speech because of discussions with Reynaud, he broadcast a condemnation of the king's capitulation and pledged to support the Allies to the utmost. Although the speech was mostly successful in diverting French anger from the Belgian refugees to Leopold, a very different popular reaction in Belgium led to nationalistic support of the king who had been "deserted" by his government.⁴² Pierlot was now in a very difficult position. He needed to unify and protect Belgian refugees in France, placate the French hosts on whom they all depended, and yet avoid a permanent break with his homeland and king.⁴³

The campaign to prove the Belgian government's loyalty in the war against Germany accelerated after Pierlot's speech on 28 May.

The Congo declared itself fully behind the government that day, Gutt and Cartier in London affirmed the government's pro-Allied stance the next day, and Spaak came to London to reassure Churchill personally a few days later. The Belgian ministers met their fellow parliamentarians in Limoges, France on 31 May. Many noisy republicans, encouraged by the French, wanted to get rid of the monarchy because of the dishonour they felt that Leopold had brought upon Belgium. The government acquiesced in strong condemnation of

⁴¹ Van Langenhove, *Garants*, 23-4. Belgians had much trouble getting food and lodging. Huizinga, *Mr. Europe*, 139-40; FO 371/24275: C7124 (BritAmbF to FO, 29 May 40).

⁴² Pierlot, "Pages," 16 Jul 47; Van Langenhove, Garants, 25; Martin Conway, Collaboration in Belgium: Leon Degrelle and the Rexist Movement 1940-44 (London: Yale University Press, 1993), 23.

⁴³ Pierlot was fairly successful with Reynaud, who later wrote that the Belgian government's attitude was "beyond reproach" during this period. Reynaud, *Thick*, 419.

⁴⁴ Times (London), 31 May 40. Spaak also persuaded Churchill to recognise the Pierlot government as the only legal Belgian national authority in a House of Commons speech on 6 June. FO 371/24282: C6687 (ConsGenl to FO, 28 May 40); PREM 4/24/3 (FO (Halifax), 28 May 40); Boelaerts, "Archives," 46, 48.

the king's capitulation, in order to vent some of the left-wing and republican anger against what some exiled Belgian labour union leaders called "inexcusable treason." This sentiment foreshadowed the reaction by Belgian Socialists in London later in the summer against Pierlot's indecision in Vichy, as well as the postwar leftist activity against King Leopold III.

Counteraction on Leopold's behalf had started as well. In the House of Commons, Admiral Keyes had asked his fellow parliamentarians to withhold judgment of Leopold. He had also condemned Reynaud for using the king as a scapegoat to hide French responsibility for Allied disasters, starting with the German victory over weak defences at Sedan. The French were so concerned about his powerful arguments that they asked Churchill to minimise British media coverage of Keyes. Reynaud, convinced that the king had acted treacherously, was also upset at Churchill's relatively mild speech on 28 May. 46 Churchill was deeply concerned about Allied solidarity and French morale, so he hardened his public position in the House of Commons on 4 June. The prime minister's concern that the king's capitulation had threatened the Dunkirk evacuation of the British and French armies was added to his previous anger about Belgian neutrality, resulting in some very harsh comments:

....Had not this ruler [King Leopold III] and his government severed themselves from the Allies, who rescued their country from extinction in the late war, and had they not sought refuge in what has proved to be a fatal neutrality, the French and British armies might well at the outset have saved not only Belgium but perhaps even Poland....Suddenly, without prior consultation, with the least possible notice, without the advice of his Ministers and upon his own personal act, he...surrendered his Army and exposed our whole flank and means of retreat....I do not feel that any reason now exists why we should not form our own opinions upon this pitiful episode....⁴⁷

Churchill's speech of 4 June was not an encouraging sign for the Pierlot government's later exile in London, but at that time the

⁴⁵ Pierlot, "Pages," 17 Jul 47; Huizinga, Mr. Europe, 141-2.

 $^{^{46}}$ Boelaerts, "Archives," 39, 43; PREM 4/24/2: 66 (BritAmbF to WSC, 29 May 40); Van Langenhove, $\it Garants$, 27

 $^{^{47}}$ Churchill, CHAR 9/140A (WSC to Commons, 4 Jun 40).

Belgians had more pressing problems. Pierlot's government was trying to confirm that it was on solid constitutional ground, as well as trying to improve Belgium's image in France. Two articles of the national constitution provided the basis for the government to function outside of Belgium without the monarch. Article 82 stated that if the king was unable to reign, the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies must convene to choose a regent. Article 79 allowed the Council of Ministers to exercise the constitutional rights of the king after his death until a regent or successor was selected by both houses of Belgium's parliament. To the relief of the government, they received documents on 6 June 1940 from the king's legal experts that confirmed their assumption of all executive power under Article 82 while the king was a prisoner of war under German control. The same batch of documents explained the circumstances of his surrender, and confirmed that the king would not challenge government actions on behalf of Belgium. Some of the ministers began to feel that perhaps they were too hasty in judging and condemning Leopold. By this time, the French had more important problems than the Belgian king to worry about, as the Germans were fighting southward from the littered beaches of Dunkirk into the heart of France. It was therefore an opportune time for Pierlot to concentrate on the war effort and ignore past mistakes such as Leopold's capture. On 11 June, he broadcast a speech to Belgians in France reaffirming loyalty to the Allies, thanking the French for their hospitality and reminding them that King Leopold III was unable to reign as a prisoner of war. 48

Meanwhile, the Belgian military in France had been working hard to provide more proof of their loyalty and value in the war against Germany. A small Belgian cadre had been sent to organise the preplanned regrouping of Belgian reserves and recent draftees in the south of France. This was to be done at designated Centres of Reinforcement and Instruction (for reservists) and Centres of

⁴⁸ Nico Gunzberg, A Democracy in Action (NY: Belgian Government Information Center (BGIC), 1945), 22-3; FO 371/24275: C7197 (Aveling to FO, 11 Jun 40); Van Langenhove, Garants, 29-33.

Recruitment of the Belgian Army (CRAB) (for draftees). Recruiting centres were soon swamped with Belgian men between 17 and 35, and the Belgian commander in France, Lieutenant General de Selliers de Moranville, pleaded for administrative help from the French during the last weeks of May. Some retired French officers finally arrived at the general's Toulouse headquarters, and by 3 June good progress had been made in adding Belgian manpower to the French war effort. 20,000 Belgians had been organised into dozens of specialised labour companies to work on farms, construction, docks and forestry, while others awaited transportation and equipment to join the battle as military units against the Germans to the north. By this time, a few Belgian army units and over 150,000 military personnel were already in France.⁴⁹

As June unfolded, the overwhelming German advance southward ruined the Belgians' plans to revive their military forces. Foreign Minister Spaak explored the possibility from his temporary headquarters in Poitiers of evacuating at least 35,000 Belgian troops with British ships. Responding to Spaak's query, Churchill replied from London on 17 June that he would continue to evacuate friendly troops as long as ports were available. The Foreign Office also told British consuls in Rabat and Casablanca to encourage Belgian pilots and flying students to come to the United Kingdom to continue the fight against the Germans. But for almost all of the Belgians in France, it was too late. The aged and defeatist Marshal H. Philippe Pétain had taken over the French government the night before from Paul Reynaud, for the purpose of negotiating an armistice with the Germans. In five days, the fighting was over in France for the

⁴⁹ Centre de Recherches et d'Études Historiques de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale (CREH), (Serie L, Gouvernement de Londres) 1LC 1: 3-9; J. Gérard-Libois and José Gotovich, L'An 40: La Belgique occupée (Bruxelles: CRISP, 1972), 235; Jean-Léon Charles, Les forces armées belges au cours de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale 1940-1945 (Bruxelles: La Renaissance du Livre, 1970), 59-60.

Belgians as well as for the French. 50

For the second time in a month, Belgian hopes were crushed under the treads of German tanks. The Belgian leadership was divided and discredited, with both king and prime minister uncertain about the future. King Leopold III had apparently revised his plans and expectations concerning his role in German-occupied Belgium because of his unconditional prisoner status and the unanimous refusal of the government to resign and endorse appointed replacements. One of the few happy moments of the summer of 1940 for the Belgian government in France was the reception of the royal documents in early June that confirmed there would be no rival Belgian government in Brussels under the sponsorship of the king. 51 Belgium would therefore be spared the soul-searching of France, which was caught in a fight between the defeatist French government at Vichy and continued French resistance led by General Charles de Gaulle. However, the dilemma created by the split between King Leopold III and his government on 25 May 1940 would lurk in the background of wartime events to emerge as Belgium's Royal Question in 1945: could the king make and execute decisions against the advice of the ministers responsible under the national constitution? Both Kings Albert and Leopold III felt that Article 68 of the constitution gave them special powers as the actual commander-in-chief of the army in war that were not accountable to the government; their premiers, de Broqueville and Pierlot, felt that all the king's major acts were subject to the government.52

Part 4. Purgatory and Indecision

The summer and autumn of 1940 was a difficult period for all

 $^{^{50}}$ FO 371/23285: C7334 (CAB to FO, 17 Jun; FO to Consuls, 3 Jul 40). Pétain was 84 in 1940. Churchill, War, 310-1; CREH, 1LC 1; Mercer, Chronicle, 86, 98.

⁵¹ Arango, Question, 67, 72; Gutt, Carrefour, 43-6.

⁵² This conflict was resolved in 1949, when Belgian kings lost personal wartime command. Arango, *Question*, 4; Paul-Henri Spaak, *The Continuing Battle: Memoirs of a European 1936-1966*, trans. Henry Fox (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), 37; Mallinson, *Belgium*, 141.

Belgians. Six million of them were adjusting with their king to Hitler's New Order in Belgium, supervised by a military government under General Alexander von Falkenhausen. Belgians had been abused by German occupation forces in the First World War, so they were somewhat prepared for the hard times that followed from 1940 to 1944. However, suddenly being in a defeated France with no easy way to escape was a frightening experience for the Belgian government, thousands of their soldiers and two million civilian refugees. Pierlot's ministers felt responsible for removing their countrymen from reliance on increasingly callous French hospitality. They also wanted to complement the military surrender of forces in Belgium on 28 May by negotiating a full peace on behalf of all Belgians in cooperation with the king. Meanwhile, conflict over policy and leadership was causing trouble among Belgian exiles in Britain. Hapless Belgian diplomats anxiously awaited developments as the summer progressed without guidance or funds. Belgium's ship of state continued its confusing course, leaving much of the world sceptical in 1940 about the Belgians in general.

If the French government had decided to continue the war from its North African colonies, the Belgian government would have gone to London in June 1940. Pierlot's proposal on 16 June was overshadowed within a day by the crumbling of the French will to fight on as Reynaud's government was undermined by the defeatist faction led by General Weygand and Marshal Pétain. The latter was the foremost living French First World War hero, who was tired of French blood being spilled and was unwilling to trust the fate of France to British determination. The Belgian government in Bordeaux was at first confused by the French position, then gradually became more defeatist itself. Two days of heated discussions on the ship Baudouinville were prejudiced by British limitations on providing transport for only half of the waiting Belgian officials and their

families and by an unopposed strafing of the ship by the Luftwaffe. The one positive action the ministers could agree on was to save the Congo for Belgium's benefit, rather than let it drift under German or British control. Albert de Vleeschauwer, Minister of Colonies, was given complete control as Administrator-General of the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi by a decree-law of the Council of Ministers on 18 June. He left Bordeaux the next day for Portugal, where he arranged new commercial and political links for the colonies with business and government offices in countries free of enemy domination. De Vleeschauwer also restarted Belgian diplomatic activity soon after arriving in Lisbon, promising full colonial cooperation with Britain and sending a warning to free Belgian businessmen and government agencies to ignore instructions from occupied territory. 54

After the pro-British de Vleeschauwer departed, the arguments on negotiating a separate Belgian armistice with Germany and then dissolving the government continued on board the Baudouinville until 21 June. Those in favour of retreating to London (Pierlot, Spaak, Gutt and the Justice Minister) were outnumbered by the defeatists. Pierlot wanted to keep his fragile coalition government working together, so he acquiesced in the decision of the majority. The day after the French armistice with Germany took effect, Spaak told the new French Foreign Minister, Paul Baudouin, that the Belgian government was ready to negotiate their own armistice. 55

It was important for political publicity and personal safety reasons to be free of German control in Bordeaux during the negotiations. The Belgian government therefore moved to the small village of Sauveterre-de-Guyenne, which was chosen for them by the

 $^{^{53}}$ FO 371/24277: C13460 (Raman-Spaak meeting, 3 Dec 40); Van Langenhove, $\it Garants$, 37-41, 51; van Aal, $\it T\'el\'ememoires$, 104.

⁵⁴ Boelaerts, "Archives," 64, 82; Albert de Vleeschauwer, "À l'occasion des articles de M. Pierlot," *La Libre Belgique*, 4 Oct 47.

⁵⁵ Van Langenhove, Garants, 51-2; Jacques Willequet, Paul-Henri Spaak: Un homme des combats (Bruxelles: Renaissance du Livre, 1975), 119.

French. Two strong reminders of their powerlessness made an impact on Pierlot and his ministers during their short stay there. The first one came from their almost total isolation from the outside world, as the village was remote and had only one telephone. The second one came when a Belgian Red Cross official stated that the king was more popular than ever, while the nation had "vomited" the government. 56

Another unpleasant episode which opened during the second half of June was the challenge posed by the Belgian Minister of Public Health, Marcel-Henri Jaspar. He had left Bordeaux for Britain without permission on 18 June. Inspired by the speech of the little-known French General Charles de Gaulle, which was broadcast from London on 18 June, Jaspar sent out an appeal to Belgians on 23 June in a similar effort to rally followers behind him in a continuing fight against Germany. Pierlot responded angrily the next day by firing Jaspar from his ministry and disavowing his proposal for the Allied cause. 57 Belgian developments in Britain will be covered in more detail later in this chapter.

Pierlot and his ten ministers moved to Vichy in early July 1940 to keep closer contact with French authorities involved in Belgian repatriation. The move was a mixed blessing, since it placed them further away from both the menace of German occupation forces and the support of Belgian senators and deputies concentrated in Limoges. News of the war and Belgian events was limited and biased, due to Vichy's political isolation and Franco-German censorship. The

⁵⁶ Van Langenhove, *Garants*, 55; Henri Anrys, *Congé pour mourir:* les Belges dans la Royal Navy (Bruxelles: Pierre de Meyère, 1975), 45. Even the Catholic Church in Belgium sided publicly with the king against the government. Marcel-Henri Jaspar, *Souvenirs sans retouche* (Paris: Fayard, 1968), 388.

⁵⁷ Keyes, *Outrageous* 413-4. Jaspar's excitable nature and concern for his Jewish wife's safety were tolerated by Pierlot's cabinet, but his desertion of a ministry tasked with caring for the two million Belgian refugees in France was inexcusable. Gutt, *Carrefour*, 65. De Gaulle's creation of a French National Committee on 23 June, as well as British recognition on 28 Jun 40 of him as the leader of exiled Frenchmen, were more examples that must have encouraged Jaspar and his sympathisers. Mercer, *Chronicle*, 100.

biggest breath of fresh air for Pierlot during his two months in the gloomy, stuffy environment of Pétain's small capital came on 17 July from a Belgian courier with the news of successful British resistance with American support.⁵⁸

Progress continued on one of Pierlot's major goals in France, the lengthy and complicated process of repatriating Belgian civilians and military personnel. The latter were especially unhappy that the French armistice had frozen them in place, leaving such units as the 7th Infantry Division behind in Brest and St. Nazaire as British ships left port. Military repatriation started in July, and often ended with the unlucky soldiers going to German prisoner-of-war camps.⁵⁹ The task was made more difficult by low military morale, bureaucratic confusion and the reduction of Belgian government funds on 1 August. In spite of these problems, Lieutenant General Henri Denis, the Belgian Minister for National Defence, told the Belgian Army on 15 August 1940 that repatriation would go on, with the cooperation of the Germans. Not everyone in a Belgian uniform trusted the "cooperative" Germans, and many fled France in spite of strict orders not to do so. Some of them ended up in the refugee internment camp at Miranda de Ebro in northern Spain, from which they were sent back to Belgium anyway. However, patrol boat P-16 did make it to England, and joined the Royal Navy as HMS Kernot. 60

Repatriation of government civilian personnel preceded the military exodus. Most ministry staff were sent home at the beginning of July, and most of the parliamentarians at Limoges were back in Belgium by the end of July. Since most of their families had already gone home, the ministers voted as a group on 18 July to return to

⁵⁸ Keyes, Outrageous, 422; Van Langenhove, Garants, 56, 91.

⁵⁹ OTAD (Office des Travaux de l'Armée demobilisée) was created in Brussels to help POWs and their families. Charles, Forces 59-60; Keyes, Outrageous, 418.

⁶⁰ Robert Capelle, *Au service du roi*, v.2 (1940-45) (Bruxelles: Charles Dessart, 1949), 67; Paul Ameye, *Les Belges dans la Royal Air Force* (Bruxelles: Ecole Royale Militare, 1961), 13. Five other patrol boat crews were repatriated by force in Feb 1941. Anrys, *Congé*, 35-6.

Belgium as private individuals. However, a German military decree on 20 July forbade their return, so they stayed at Vichy for another five weeks as men without a country. Meanwhile, the Red Cross and other agencies took over the hundreds of trains repatriating civilian refugees; by the beginning of October 1940, nearly 1.5 million had been returned. Looting of their homes in Belgium and mistreatment in France embittered many refugees toward further involvement in the war. 61

The efforts of the Pierlot government to negotiate a full peace with the Germans went little further than the ministers themselves. The first initiative on 19 June met with threats of British support being withdrawn, as well as a rebuff from King Leopold III. The latter stated that as a prisoner of war, he could not be involved with politicians or political matters such as an armistice. In spite of being kept at a distance by Leopold for the rest of the war, Pierlot tried to reduce political divisions among Belgians by touting the prisoner-king as a national rallying point in patriotic speeches from 21 July 1940 until after Belgium's liberation in 1944.⁶² The Germans would not cooperate with the Belgian government's attempts to negotiate either, choosing to ignore them completely. Hitler felt that since he ruled in Brussels, there was no Belgian government worth dealing with.⁶³

In similar manner, the Germans began to degrade the status of the exiled governments as representatives of their conquered peoples in the late summer of 1940. Concerning the Belgians in particular, the Germans forced the Bank of France to end services to the Pierlot

⁶¹ Livre, 187, 203; John Lukacs, The Last European War: September 1939-December 1941 (Garden City, NY: Anchor-Doubleday, 1976), 190-1, 413-4; Mallinson, Belgium, 118. The French often deserve their reputation for condescension toward foreigners, but the extenuating circumstances of a shocking defeat and the burden of six million of their compatriots fleeing the Germans can excuse some of the rudeness in 1940 towards the Belgians in southern France. Shirer, Republic, 3.

⁶² Van Langenhove, *Garants*, 49, 89; Arango, *Question*, 76-7; Keyes, *Outrageous*, 446.

⁶³ Keyes, Outrageous, 416; Wagner, Politik, 142; Gutt, Carrefour, 78.

government on 1 August. Losing access to Belgian national funds meant losing independence and dignity, as well as being unable to support repatriation and the needs of refugees seeking help in Vichy. As a result of this new crisis, Pierlot unsuccessfully sought advice from King Leopold III on whether to resign or flee to Britain. 64

It was at this point that personalities and events in Britain intruded into Pierlot's isolated existence. The renegade minister Jaspar and his formidable Socialist ally Camille Huysmans had been mounting a noisy and persistent challenge to the Belgian government for several weeks. On the advice of Belgian leaders abroad, the Foreign Office avoided taking Jaspar too seriously. Huysmans, however, had strong support from Labour party ministers in Churchill's coalition government and was accepted by Belgian politicians in Britain as the head of the Belgian National Committee. This ambitious leftist politician did not appreciate the arrival of de Vleeschauwer in London on 5 July 1940. As an important official representative of the recognised Belgian government, de Vleeschauwer was supported by Churchill as a vital top-level link to the Belgian prime minister and rich African colonies. 65

Another big obstacle to the republican Huysmans was Ambassador Cartier, who strongly supported the monarchy and the Belgian government as institutions important for the future of Belgium.

Cartier assisted de Vleeschauwer in gaining credibility with most other Belgian diplomats when they procured and distributed enough money to cover two months of back pay and supplies. De Vleeschauwer arranged an indefinite delay in British recognition of the leftist Belgian National Committee, so Huysmans temporarily modified it as the Belgian Parliamentary Office (BPO) on 20 July. British recognition of the Czechoslovak National Committee four days later

⁶⁴ Vichy broke diplomatic relations with Belgium and other occupied countries on 5 Sept 40. Van Langenhove, *Garants*, 98-9, 221; Gutt, *Carrefour*, 76.

⁶⁵ FO 371/24275: C7369 & C7651 (FO (Halifax) 20 Jun & 5 Jul 40),
/24276: C8100 (FO (Makins), 26 Jul 40; Boelaerts, "Archives," 90, 95.

must have been especially irritating to the BPO.66

The Belgian government's cause was also kept alive by favourable publicity such as that given to Ambassador Cartier's Belgian National Day activities on 21 July, as well as by successful legal action against an outrageous Daily Mirror attack on King Leopold III. On 30 May 1940, the newspaper berated Admiral Keyes for asking that judgment on Leopold be suspended until all the facts were known. The Daily Mirror then added the following vilification of the king and the admiral:

....Judgments 'not suspended' concerning him [Leopold] have been given by the French Premier, and by King Rat's own people as now constitutionally represented by M. Pierlot, the Belgian Premier... Did you [Keyes] sniff the Rat King? Smell any stench of treachery?....Don't you know a damned deserter when you see one?⁶⁷

However, more ministers in London were needed to establish the long-term international legitimacy of the Belgian government, so de Vleeschauwer went to Spain in mid-July to persuade his compatriots to join him beside the British in continuing the war against Germany. The British had told the Administrator-General of the Colonies that the minimum acceptable Belgian government would have to include the prime minister (Pierlot) with the foreign (Spaak) and finance (Gutt) ministers, so de Vleeschauwer concentrated on recruiting those three. Following Foreign Office advice, he avoided potential capture in Vichy France by arranging a meeting on the Franco-Spanish border at Perthus with the help of the Belgian consulate in Barcelona. 68

⁶⁶ FO 371/24279: C7731 (Gutt to Treasury, 9 Jul 40); Boelaerts, "Archives," 82, 114. Recognition of the Czechs put pressure on de Vleeschauwer to get other ministers to London, as British patience was not unlimited. Boelaerts, "Archives," 95, 109, 113; Keyes, Outrageous, 429-31.

⁶⁷ Keyes forced the *Daily Mirror* to back down in late 1940 with a libel suit. PREM 4/24/5: 240 (*Daily Mirror*, 30 May), 218 (Woomer to Cox & Son, 9 Oct 40). Even the *Times* was reprimanded by the FO for criticising Belgian authorities in France and the Congo in August 1940. FO 371/24276: C8827 (Ward to Dawson, 28 Aug 40). On 21 July, Cartier made a BBC broadcast, and attended the traditional cenotaph memorial ceremony (Belgium was granted this unique privilege for foreigners after the First World War). Boelaerts, "Archives," 110.

⁶⁸ De Vleeschauwer, "L'occasion," 5 Oct 47; Boelaerts,
"Archives," 125; van Aal, Télémemoires, 127.

Patience and good luck permitted the crucial meeting among de Vleeschauwer, Gutt, Spaak and Pierlot on 2 August to last for two hours unsupervised by suspicious border guards. Since the need for better control of Belgian international finances was already obvious to the government, Gutt had already prepared for a possible exit. He returned to London with de Vleeschauwer, while Pierlot and Spaak returned to Vichy to tell the other ministers that it was time to go to Britain. For the first time since their odyssey in France had begun, Pierlot and Spaak were willing to leave without their colleagues. This was the most important decision made by the Belgian government during the journey through its French purgatory enroute to Britain.

Even after receiving news of British perseverance in the Battle of Britain and the threat of the leftist BPO politicians, the other eight ministers still did not want to go to Britain. They also criticised Pierlot and Spaak for choosing London over less controversial destinations such as the United States or the Belgian Congo. The eight ministers were concerned about continuing the war against Germany because of possible reprisals against their own families and the Belgian conscripts waiting in enemy camps for repatriation. They were also uneasy about challenging the king who chose to stay in Belgium instead of going into exile to continue fighting the Germans, as well as being in awe of German military prowess and victories. 70 After three weeks of discussions and conflicting pressures to act by London and Vichy, all ministers staying in France resigned their posts while Pierlot and Spaak prepared for departure with the cover story of going to the United States. Anxious to leave, Spaak and the Pierlot family departed on 28 August with French exit visas and the promise of Spanish transit

⁶⁹ Van Aal, Télémemoires, 127-9; Willequet, Combats, 120.

⁷⁰ Jean Stengers, Léopold III et le gouvernement: les deux politiques belges de 1940 (Paris: Editions Duculot, 1980), 125-6; Van Langenhove, Garants, 100.

visas when they got to the border.71

A series of problems getting across Spain started the next day at Perthus. The Spanish border police would not produce the promised transit visas for Pierlot and Spaak, while the Vichy French border police insisted on signed oaths that the two ministers would not go to Britain. Pierlot's indignant refusal to sign caused the French to back down, but a power struggle within the Spanish government blocked the two transit visas. Visas originally approved by the foreign minister were revoked by the more pro-German interior minister, who also controlled the police and border guards. The dispute that followed had Vichy French and Spanish authorities opposed by Belgian and British diplomats. The small group of Belgians was stranded between Spain and France, refused entry by the former and fearing probable arrest by the latter. British threats of publicity about abuse of diplomatic privilege and Pierlot's children added enough pressure to get the group into Spain; the transit visas for Mrs. Pierlot and her children were then used to get them to Portugal.72

After two weeks of being shunted around, Pierlot and Spaak started a period of virtual house arrest in Barcelona under the watch of Spanish secret police. Belgian and British efforts to free them continued, although the latter were becoming disenchanted with the complex Belgian situation. The Foreign Office instructed the British ambassador to Spain to exert all possible pressure to get the "miserable" Belgian ministers released, short of breaking off Anglo-Spanish economic negotiations. As the impasse dragged on into a new month, plans to use the Royal Navy for a daring rescue were aired and

⁷¹ Mrs. Pierlot and her seven children had Spanish transit visas, easing some of Papa Pierlot's concerns. Boelaerts, "Archives," 156, 162-3; Pierlot, "Pages," 18 Jul 47. The reluctant ex-ministers left behind by Pierlot and Spaak joined about 20,000 long-term Belgian exiles in France, most of them in the Vichy-controlled "unoccupied" zone. La Belgique Indépendante (BI) (London), 16 Jan 41.

⁷² Pierlot, "Pages," 18 Jul 47; FO 371/24276: C9008 (Strang to Phillips, 2 Oct 40), C9491 (Hoare to FO, 5 Sep 40); van Aal, Télémemoires, 136-7. Anglo-Congo activities and lack of cooperation from King Leopold III were the probable motivation for the Germans to block the move of the formerly-ignored Belgian government to London.

soon dismissed as too risky for "two rather worthless individuals." The limits of British intervention had apparently been reached.

Belgian hopes of extracting Pierlot and Spaak from the grasp of the Spanish authorities were also nearly gone in London. Gutt and de Vleeschauwer were discouraged and under great pressure from Huysmans' BPO, which was supported by some mid-level Foreign Office staff. Francis Aveling, counsellor of the British embassy in Brussels, remained the main intermediary between the Foreign Office and the Belgians in the absence of the ambassador, Sir Lancelot Oliphant (captured by the Germans in June 1940). Forgetting diplomatic neutrality, Aveling sided with the BPO against the Belgian embassy and government during 1940. His bias was counter to official Foreign Office policy, and aggravated Anglo-Belgian misunderstandings.74

Jaspar's harsh attack on Pierlot as the "Apostle of Defeat" in the London Evening Standard on 27 September 1940 was the final impetus for de Vleeschauwer and Gutt to declare a two-man Belgian government instead of waiting for Pierlot and Spaak to arrive. They had been authorised to do it by Pierlot and Spaak on 7 September if circumstances justified it. British and BPO pressure to include the parliamentarians in official Belgian decision-making continued after Gutt and de Vleeschauwer publicised their new government in a radio broadcast to Belgium on 3 October 1940. Although the latters' goals of freeing Belgium and King Leopold III through concerted action with the Allies were agreeable to their competitors, such a small regime could easily be rebuked as unrepresentative of a nation of eight million. This problem would continue even after the arrival of Pierlot and Spaak in London.75

⁷³ FO 371/24277: C11353 (FO (Makins), 5 Oct 40); Van Aal, *Télémemoires*, 138; Van Langenhove, *Garants*, 102-5.

⁷⁴ FO 371/24275: C7284 (FO (Makins), 21 Jun 40), /24276: C9215 (BPO manifesto, 20 Aug 40); Van Langenhove, *Garants*, 115-9, 149.

⁷⁵ FO 371/24276: C10433 (Evening Standard, 27 Sep 40), C10561 (FO (Sargent), 2 Oct 40), C10784 (Times, 4 Oct 40), C11263-4 (FO (Makins), 15 Oct 40), C11266 (Aveling to FO, 21 Oct 40); Van

Pressure for action had also been growing in Spain. Pierlot and Spaak felt that the danger to their freedom, or even to their personal safety, was increasing rapidly. The Spanish interior minister who was hostile to them became the foreign minister only three days before the arrival on 20 October of Heinrich Himmler, one of Hitler's most feared henchmen. Pierlot and Spaak felt that they had to try their escape plan or lose all hope of leaving Spain.76 On 19 October, after six weeks of quiet planning and relaxed appearances, the Belgians took advantage of Spanish police complacency to escape. Hidden in a secret compartment of a truck owned by the Belgian consulate in Barcelona, Pierlot and Spaak crossed into Portugal after a 17-hour drive on back roads across Spain. 77 Anxious to get to London, as well as to distance themselves from numerous German agents in neutral Portugal, Pierlot and Spaak left Lisbon by seaplane on 22 October 1940 to face a new future beside the British and the other exile governments.78

Part 5. Conclusion

In the traumatic summer of 1940, Belgium was occupied by the Germans and her leaders left bewildered by the unforeseen pace of events and difficult choices in the midst of national disaster. The policy of modified neutrality had not prevented the Germans from invading Belgium for the second time in 26 years, nor had limited military planning and a desperate campaign with the Allied armies kept King Leopold III's troops from a crushing defeat. There was

Langenhove, Garants, 128-33, 156.

⁷⁶ Boelaerts, "Archives," 287, 294. Ramon Serrano Suner and his brother-in-law, dictator General Francisco Franco, were only pro-German if it helped Spain. Toland, *Hitler*, 870-3, 885, 1064.

⁷⁷ Huizinga, *Mr. Europe*, 169-70; Van Langenhove, *Garants*, 151. Because the escape was unexpected and during a weekend, the police did not alert the distant border with Portugal in time to stop Pierlot and Spaak. Van Aal, *Télémemoires*, 139.

⁷⁸ Boelaerts, "Archives," 299. Top Spanish leaders reacted in a low-key manner to the Belgians' escape, probably so that it would not become an issue at Franco's meeting with Hitler at Hendaye, France on 23 Oct 40. Toland, *Hitler*, 868.

little the Belgians could have done between October 1936 and May 1940 to avert a disaster primarily caused by the actions and attitudes of her larger neighbours as they struggled to cope with economic depression, political militancy and unchecked aggression.

In hindsight, it can be asserted that the biggest mistake made by the Belgian leadership in 1940 was King Leopold III's decision to stay in Belgium as a defeated commander-in-chief rather than retreat with his prime minister to continue the fight for national independence. His action not only divided Belgians during the war, but also led to the emotional postwar Royal Question that dealt with the power of the king to make and execute decisions against the advice of the responsible ministers. It is to Leopold's credit that he did not succumb to Belgian pressure to form a collaborator government, and also fortunate that his absence from France in the summer of 1940 made Pierlot's offer of a full armistice insignificant to the Germans. However, the precedent of other monarchs joining their governments outside the homeland, combined with the known harshness of German occupation, should have been enough to convince King Leopold III that leaving was better than staying. **

Pierlot's decision to stay in France after the June 1940 armistice was in accordance with the wishes of most of his ministers and the needs of two million Belgian refugees. As a concerned official national leader, he had a unique responsibility to organise and fund the departure of his compatriots from their unwilling French hosts. The option of staying in the south of France or fleeing to the Iberian Peninsula was open mainly to those with money and mobility, and the repressive dictatorships of Spain and Portugal

⁷⁹ Arango, *Question*, 4; *Livre*, 184, 214; Huizinga, *Mr. Europe*, 161-4. By refusing to deal with Pierlot, the Germans unknowingly helped to keep Belgium in the war.

⁸⁰ Other monarchs who joined their governments in London to continue fighting the Axis were from the Netherlands (May 1940), Norway (Jun 1940), Yugoslavia (Jun 1941) and Greece (Sep 1941). The murder in Bulgaria of King Boris III (Aug 1943) showed that even cooperative kings were not secure in Hitler's Europe. Mercer, Chronicle, 84, 91, 226, 438; Nigel Thomas and Simon McCouaig, Foreign Volunteers of the Allied Forces 1939-45 (London: Osprey, 1991), 34.

showed little promise of being long-term havens in an Axis-dominated Europe. Sending Belgian Army reserve units to Britain in mid-June would have been extremely difficult without the help of overwhelmed French authorities and the dispatch of top political and military leaders to monitor their reception and use by the British. Once he was committed to substantial dependence on the French, Pierlot had little choice but to repatriate most of the Belgians after the Franco-German armistice. He was most open to criticism for the harsh penalties against military personnel who left France for Britain, as well as for the five weeks of indecision during the summer in Vichy between losing the option to return to Belgium and his own departure for Britain via Spain.

Pierlot, King Leopold III, Jaspar and Cartier had all acted with honourable intentions, but with different perspectives, to help Belgian national interests from 1936 to 1940. Defeat and very divergent approaches on how to deal with an uncertain future had inflamed differences among them, as well as making the Belgians the most difficult exile group for the British to deal with in late 1940. By voluntarily accomplishing a difficult escape from Spain, Pierlot and Spaak had apparently shaken off the defeatism and indecision of their frustrating exile in Vichy, but they had not overcome justifiable British scepticism of them. The two men had more than just challenges from the Germans waiting for them as they travelled to London.

Chapter II: Refuge and Respect, 1940-1944

In spite of the Belgians' political and military disarray in October 1940, the sturdy, but uncharismatic, team of Hubert Pierlot, Paul-Henri Spaak, Camille Gutt and Albert de Vleeschauwer were able to gain the respect and cooperation of their British hosts and Belgian rivals by determined actions supporting the Allied cause and by firm use of their official status to establish control of the Belgian war effort. They used the economic power provided by a large gold reserve and the vast resources of the Belgian colonies to provide international economic and political leverage to advance both the Allied war effort and Belgian national interests. Their efforts to forge a strong policy and to get a meaningful Allied role for Belgium were complicated by political jealousies and an uncertain relationship with the captive King Leopold III. The latter problem will be discussed more thoroughly in chapters IV and VI. This chapter will focus on the challenges faced by the Belgians in dealing with their British hosts and with each other in exile. Finding longterm refuge and respect was neither easy nor certain for any Belgian arriving in Britain in 1940.

The British hosts of Pierlot, Spaak and dozens of other government ministers from occupied Europe were disappointed by several of the personalities and problems of their Allied guests by October 1940. Many of the British would have agreed with the personal relief of government minister Anthony Eden and King George VI in June 1940 that Britain would no longer have to pamper allies after France was defeated. However, London's military and economic weakness, combined with the need to lessen the American anti-imperialist bias hampering assistance for the British war effort, soon made the exiles from the Continent more attractive as junior partners and proof of Britain's central role in the international war against aggression by Hitler and Mussolini.

¹ Bond, Britain, 117; PREM 3/43: 43 (W.P.(40) 281, 22 Jul 40).

The personal conflicts and cultural problems of the exiles followed them to Britain, providing their hosts with an uncomfortable exposure to once-distant complications in waging a united war effort against the Axis. For example, Dutch Prime Minister D.J. de Geer had to resign in August 1940 because of his defeatism and inability to get along with headstrong Queen Wilhelmina. He made his disgrace even worse by returning to the occupied Netherlands to retire.2 Belgian political divisions pitted leftists and pro-Allied leaders against conservative monarchists, defeatist diplomats and discouraged refugees. Inactive and impatient soldiers in all Allied contingents formed an unhappy collection of potential troublemakers who could be given little help by the overwhelmed British Army in 1940. It was fortunate that the morale and effectiveness of all Allied ground forces improved by the end of 1942 as a result of better training, equipment and organisation in Britain, as well as combat success against Axis ground and naval forces.

Part 1. Overcoming British Attitudes

The revival of the Belgian government through the reunion of its four most vital ministers on 22 October 1940 ended the vague political status of the Belgian exiles. A heavy load of official duties was shared by the quartet, who had left many of their staff members and nine fellow ministers in Belgium or France. Pierlot was still Prime Minister, as well as assuming responsibility for education, recruiting and refugees. In addition to foreign affairs and exterior commerce, Spaak took the labour, propaganda and information portfolios. Finance Minister Gutt also ran the ministries of national defence and communications, while de Vleeschauwer added being Minister of Justice to his task of overseeing the colonies. Their duties were organised, but their future in Britain was still clouded by attitudes such as the enduring

² FO 432/7: 65 (Bland to Eden, 18 Jun 41); Louis de Jong, "The Dutch Government in Exile," *Holland*, 7.

grudge that Churchill held against those leaders who had forged and upheld Belgium's neutrality from 1936 to 1940. Luckily for Pierlot, Churchill avoided getting entangled in Belgian exile politics as long as Belgian resources continued to support the Allied war effort.

Like their premier, the British public was not very favourable in 1940 towards the Belgians; other exile groups were suspect, as well. Most of the British were personally kind and polite to the newcomers, but as a nation they were uncomfortable with so many aliens arriving during a time of wartime threats and uncertainty. As individuals, the refugees from enemy-occupied Europe had to cope with a strange language and culture in their new haven, restrictions and suspicion of foreigners based on the alien "fifth column" hysteria of mid-1940, and isolation from their countrymen as national groups were scattered into any available shelter or camp. As groups or governments, the exiles were agitated by the process of fleeing in defeat from a brutal enemy in possession of their homelands, and many internal and external political problems followed them to Britain.

A look at British attitudes and actions towards foreigners in the early part of the Second World War is required first, in order to understand the complications faced by the exiles in establishing an official place in the political life of their beleaguered island refuge.

Concern about foreign residents in Britain had been voiced even before war was declared in September 1939. Seven months before, an *Evening Standard* article had stated that the Gestapo had 400 agents in Britain, including Jewish refugees. Aliens tribunals checked and classified 55,000 refugees from October 1939 to February 1940, placing them in three categories of reliability. German success in overwhelming France and the Low Countries made the United Kingdom seem even more vulnerable to penetration by the enemy, and wild stories from the Dutch disaster in particular fanned latent fears.

 $^{^{3}}$ PREM 3/69A: 58-9 (Churchill to Eden, 27 May 44); FO 317/24277: C13983 (BritEmbB to FO, 27 Dec 40).

Even the escaped British ambassador to the Netherlands gave great credit to a fifth column of resident Germans in defeating the Dutch. By mid-May 1940, the Home Office was urging the public to watch for German parachutists and the War Office called for the establishment of widespread Local Defence Volunteer (soon renamed Home Guard) units. The War Cabinet wanted all enemy aliens aged 16 to 70 to be interned, and non-enemy aliens from occupied Europe were to be restricted in their movements and use of motor vehicles.⁴

Measures to deal with aliens were influenced by First World War experiences and the 1920 Aliens Order, with supplementary rules added in 1940. Coastal counties and towns from Nairn (northern Scotland) to Hampshire (south-central England) were areas of restricted movement for male aliens outside the diplomatic service. This was later modified to allow more freedom to Allied military personnel and non-resident seamen. London, with about half of the civilian aliens in Britain, had looser restrictions; diplomatic and social patterns required more flexibility in the capital than elsewhere.⁵

The hysteria concerning aliens affected Belgians in Britain at all levels. Belgian government officials in camps around London were upset about being treated like potential spies, but the Home Office would only release them after they had been individually vouched for by embassy staff. Emile Cammaerts, a Belgian expatriate professor at the University of London, was told to vacate his long-term home near London in June 1940, but the personal intervention of Ambassador Cartier and Foreign Secretary Halifax led to the eviction order being rescinded. Belgian refugee families were harassed by locals in London's Hammersmith, Dulwich and Richmond districts, and the British

⁴ The 600 "A" (unreliable) and 6,800 "B" (uncertain) aliens were interned in May and June 1940. The 48,000 remaining "C" (reliable) prewar aliens and most of the summer refugees were subject to strict curfews, police registration and locale restrictions for the next few years. De Jong, Fifth Column, 22, 95-8, 100-3; FO 371/25189: W7984 (CAB JI Committee (40) 68, 16 May 40), W8110 (Cavendish-Bentinck to Cadogan, 16 Jun 40).

 $^{^{5}}$ HO 213/554 (S.R. & O. 1940 No.720, 11 May 40), /588 (Census, 31 Mar 44), /590 (HO (Gwynn), 20 Sep 43).

tried to recruit Belgian informants to spy on their exiled compatriots. The latter led to an embassy warning to Whitehall about biased reports prompted by political differences instead of facts.

The disconcerting preciseness of "Lord Haw Haw," Germany's American-born radio announcer (William Joyce), made it seem that many enemy spies in the UK were feeding him information. In reality, all German-controlled spies sent to Britain from 1939 to 1945 were soon caught before they could damage the Allied war effort. At least three Belgians sent as spies became effective double agents, and some joined more of their countrymen in tricking the Germans after Brussels was liberated in September 1944.

By January 1941, the London Reception Centre (LRC) was created to consolidate and process all alien visitors and escapees for Home Office registration and MI5 (counter-intelligence) interrogations. It soon emphasised reception rather than internment, and the only real irritation for 95% of the processed aliens was being detained under guard for a few days without contact or communication with waiting family or friends. Anyone with an inconsistent story or factors favourable to recruiting by the Germans was sent to Camp 20 for more thorough interrogation. Belgian embassy officials told the Foreign Office that LRC procedures were an ineffective way to get intelligence information because they put exiles on the defensive to the extent of creating resentful silence. The British eventually agreed to expedite important arrivals with Foreign Office help, but the Belgians were still concerned by LRC using Polish, Czech and

⁶ FO 371/24283: C6927 (FO (Ward), 29 May 40), C11926 (FO to HO, 8 Nov 40); Emile Cammaerts Papers, University of London Belgian Collection, MS-800/II: 184 (Halifax to Cartier, 17 Jun 40); Joanna Mack and Steve Humphries, *London at War* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1985), 29.

⁷ Another Belgian was the last wartime enemy spy hanged in the UK (July 1944). F.H. Hinsley and C.A.G. Simkins, British Intelligence in the Second World War, vol. 4: Security and Counterintelligence (UKMS) (London: HMSO, 1990), 41, 91-3, 111-23, 218-9, 343-5, 382-84; John Masterman, The Double-Cross System in the War of 1939 to 1945 (New Haven, USA: Yale University Press, 1972), 98-109, 143, 168; Norman Longmate, How We Lived Then (London: Hutchinson, 1971), 96. Joyce's information on Allied units was from POWs and journals.

Norwegian security service advisors in greater proportion than Belgian ones. General Allied dissatisfaction with the LRC Royal Patriotic Schools environment led to an upgrade in facilities and more visits or group welcomes by Allied representatives by mid-1942.8

American entry into the Second World War in December 1941 offered the Foreign Office the big opportunity it needed to modify British restrictions on aliens, as the Security Executive realised it could not subject U.S. citizens to the same treatment as those of the smaller Allies. Pressure on the Home Office and MI5 for better treatment and fewer restrictions had been increasing for over a year from British agencies as well as Allied ones. The Lindley Committee had been established in mid-1940 to deal with foreign government appeals on behalf of detained aliens, and the War Office had complained in mid-1941 to the Home Office that the detention and refugee camps were too great a drain on its resources.

Popular support for mass internment of innocent refugees also decreased after an internee transport was torpedoed in the Atlantic with great loss of life. Growing awareness of the shabby treatment of mostly Jewish German-born anti-Nazis in isolated camps on the Isle of Man also made detention more distasteful. Another factor in the British change of heart was the need for Allied exile manpower due to a chronic skilled labour shortage. Aliens Orders in March 1942 reflected the new trends by relieving Allied aliens of special curfew, vehicle, travel and map-owning restrictions; the Home Office

⁸ 7-9,000 aliens per year went through the LRC 1941-44; most of the Belgians after the summer 1940 group came after mid-1942. The few spies in the last wave became double agents, internees for Allied home punishment, or were executed. Hinsley, *Counterintelligence*, 71-2, 184, 339-44; FO 371/32230: W1185 (FO (Ward), 6 Jan 42), W1751 (Between Ward & Newsam, 2 & 24 Feb 42), /32231: W10626 (FO (Ward), 6 Aug & Eden to Robertson, 26 Aug 42).

⁹ WO resources were needed to control EPWs (enemy POWs) in Britain, starting in 1941 with 3,000 Italians; by 1945, 224,000 EPWs were doing manual labour. FO 371 /25198: W9656 (Warford to Carey, 2 Sep 40), /25254: W12195 (FO (Barclay), 22 Nov 40), /32233: W600 (FO (Ward & Makins), 29 & 31 Dec 41); WO 32/10672 (WO to HO, 23 Jul 41).

was finally relaxing. 10

In light of the above British treatment of aliens, as well as specific hostility towards the Belgian surrender of May 1940, it is easier to understand how large and complex a challenge it was for Pierlot at the end of 1940 to upgrade the image of King Leopold III. The Belgian premier needed to use the king's patriotism as a rallying point for the majority of Belgians who were loyal to the monarchy, without further alienating a British public and government that had been extremely critical of the king's prewar neutrality and conduct during May 1940. Pierlot and his ministers were very careful about how they treated Leopold's public image, and the British government adopted the same official policy within a month of Pierlot's arrival in London. 11

Both the British and Belgians knew that it was possible for the king to establish a new government in Brussels if the one minister still there was willing to countersign the action as legal. Gutt's official protest of a harsh and prominent newspaper attack in October 1940 against Leopold's character prompted the Foreign Office to caution the Sunday Dispatch about possibly helping anti-British propaganda by the Germans in Belgium. Some British newspapers such as the Times changed their coverage of King Leopold III from earlier negative publicity to giving him some credit for resisting the Germans, and finally placing him in the background as Pierlot

 $^{^{10}}$ FO 371/32233: W3766 (S.R. & O. 1942 Nos. 423-5, 8 Mar 42); Henry Parker, Manpower: A Study of Wartime Policy and Administration (UKCS) (London: HMSO, 1957), 154, 347-8. Over a third of the 1,500 German and Italian internees aboard the Arandora Star died when it was sunk on 2 Jul 40 enroute to Canada. Mercer, Chronicle, 102-3.

¹¹ Huizinga, *Mr. Europe*, 174; FO 371/24286: C12724 (de Sausmarez to Harvey, 11 Nov 40). Representatives of the FO, MEW, CO, MOI and military services agreed on 8 Nov to gradually replace Leopold's British public image from traitor to overwhelmed field commander who was still a focus of resistance to the Germans.

¹² FO 371/24286: C12724 (de Sausmarez to Harvey, 11 Nov 40),
C11265 (Sunday Dispatch-Halifax-Gutt et al., 22 Oct-5 Nov 40).
Antoine Delfosse had been overtaken by the Germans in May 1940. The
constitution stated that a document signed by the king became
national law only when countersigned by a minister. Keyes,
Outrageous, 4, 421. This legal point supported Pierlot's statement
that Leopold's army surrender did not apply to the nation.

revived official Belgian efforts in the war against the Axis.13 Other newspapers such as the Sunday Pictorial still issued occasional slurs against the Belgian monarch, but such attacks became even more rare after the loss of a libel suit concerning a Daily Mirror article defaming Leopold was given substantial publicity in June 1941.14

The change in the British government's official approach to King Leopold III was also reflected in the War Cabinet's transition from initial opposition to Keyes' libel suit against the Daily Mirror to acquiescence after the Attorney General verified its legal acceptability in May 1941. On 29 May, a speech by Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden praised Leopold publicly for the first time as a dignified prisoner of war. The Foreign Office then informed the Ministry of Information that the time was ripe to make more frequent positive references to the Belgian king in British propaganda, with the proviso that references to his controversial decision to become a prisoner of war were to be avoided.15

The improvement in British public treatment of King Leopold III from 1940 to 1941 was appreciated by the Belgian exiles, whose cause was helped by others besides their prominent friend in Parliament, Admiral Keyes. Expatriate Belgian Professor Emile Cammaerts had tirelessly defended Leopold and the Belgian cause and published a well-received book on the king in 1941 with a complimentary preface

¹⁵ Eden's speech at Mansion House indicated the key role of the FO in upgrading the status of the Belgians. FO 371/26335: C6209 (Mackenzie to de Sausmarez, 14 Jun 41); /26356: C2966 (FO (Harrison), 24 Mar, C5654, (Attorney General & Eden to Attlee, 23 & 24 May 41).



 $^{^{13}}$ Quotes from the *Times* in 1940: "it is impossible not to sympathise with M. Reynaud's bitterness" (29 May); "very obstinate and autocratic,....King Leopold must bear the chief responsibility for the present tragedy..." (31 May); "Leopold's non-cooperation has removed some of the painful impressions created by his original surrender" (7 Oct); Pierlot and Spaak stayed in France until their help with refugee repatriation was no longer needed.... The Belgian constitution allows the Belgian government to perform full executive and legislative powers (24 Oct).

¹⁴ The first-named article listed Leopold with the Italian king as a ruler who had sold out to Hitler. FO 371/26335: C3347 (Cooper-Campbell with Sunday Pictorial, 21 & 26 Mar 41). Admiral Keyes' legal victory was noted in an approving tone by the *Times* (14 Jun 41). 30 May 40 *Daily Mirror* attack was footnoted in Chapter I.

by Keyes.¹⁶ As they became more comfortable with the British people and the English language, Belgian government ministers joined Cammaerts and others in polishing Belgium's tarnished image to a brighter lustre in the minds of their hosts. Spaak's speech to students at the University of Cambridge in February 1941 defended Belgium's policy of independent neutrality from 1936 to 1940 and King Leopold's conduct during May 1940. Publications by Cammaerts and the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1941 presented these topics to a bigger audience.¹⁷

Other media added more pro-Belgian publicity from 1942 to 1944 through motion pictures, such as *Uncensored* (about Belgium's most famous underground newspaper, *La Libre Belgique*) and *The Flemish Farm* (about the retrieval of a Belgian aviation regiment's hidden flag for use by Belgian airmen in Britain). In addition, a travelling exhibit, "Belgium at War," hosted 60,000 visitors during its first six weeks in London before going on a popular two-year tour of Britain.¹⁸

Although improved British public opinion and official acceptance of the Belgian leadership was very helpful to the Pierlot government, it did not guarantee the full cooperation of all British government agencies or officials. One important official in particular was hostile to the Belgian government during Pierlot's first year in London. Francis Aveling was the British chargé d'affaires to the Belgian exile government in London from mid-1940 until the end of 1941. Instead of functioning as the top diplomat

¹⁶ Vers l'Avenir (Tenby), 5 Jul 41; Times, 25 Jun 41; Emile Cammaerts, The Prisoner of Laeken (London: Cresset, 1941), xviii.

¹⁷ FO 432/7: 35 (Aveling to Eden, 22 Feb 41); Cammaerts' The Situation of Belgium, September 1939-January 1941 (London: Evans Bros., 1941) was sent to the FO by Ambassador Cartier. Cammaerts' prose was made more effective by his voluntary passion for the Belgian cause and his knowledge of the British based on long service since 1931 at the University of London. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) book, Belgium: The Official Account of What Happened 1939-1940, was cited in Chapter I.

¹⁸ Times, 9 Aug 43; La Belgique Indépendante (BI), 7 & 21 Jan 43, 18 Feb-19 Aug 43, 24 Feb-28 Dec 44 passim. Another exhibit, "Views of Belgium and the Belgian Congo," later toured Britain for a year. Ibid., 27 Apr 44-19 Apr 45.

and unbiased communicator between the British and Belgian governments, Aveling had sided with the Belgian Parliamentary Office (BPO) in 1940 and continued to criticise Pierlot and his three remaining ministers harshly for over a year. For example, Aveling had told Halifax and Eden that Jaspar and the BPO were mostly responsible for Pierlot and his three ministers coming to Britain, and belittled the last named group while lavishly praising their rivals and First World War predecessors.¹⁹

Pierlot's image with the British was hurt by Aveling's lack of support, especially as it contrasted with the more optimistic approach used by Sir Nevile Bland, Ambassador to the Netherlands. His reports and actions with the Dutch exile government helped its standing with the British government staffs working along Whitehall in London, in spite of the Dutch refusal in 1940 to move to a state of war with Italy or to loan their gold to Britain. In short, Aveling's negative attitude ensured that most comparisons between the Dutch and the Belgians within the Foreign Office in 1940 and 1941 were unhelpful to Pierlot and his government.

Aveling had been running the British embassy to the Belgian government as the substitute for Sir Lancelot Oliphant, the former ambassador to Brussels. Separated from the rest of the embassy staff during the evacuation of the city, Oliphant had been captured by the Germans on 2 June 1940. His release on 25 September 1941 after an exchange of detained diplomats with the Germans was good news for the

¹⁹ FO 371/24275: C7284 (FO (Makins), 21 Jun 40), /24276 : C11292
(Aveling to FO, 20 Oct 40); FO 432/6: 194 (Aveling to Halifax, 18 Oct
40), /7: 32 & 50 (Aveling to Eden, 9 Jan & 14 Nov 41); Jaspar,
Souvenirs, 461. A. Francis Aveling (1893-1954) retired as counsellor
from the Brussels embassy in 1946. Who Was Who (WWW) (London: Black,
1961), 5:47.

 $^{^{20}}$ FO 432/7: 65 (Bland to Eden, 18 Jun 41); FO 371 /24462: C11112 (Van Kleffens & Halifax, 11-27 Jun 40), C11599 (Treasury to Makins, 24 Oct; Mackenzie (FO), 28 Dec 40). The Dutch government, like the Belgian one, had also been unpopular in the FO in early 1940. FO 371/24458: C2011 (Makins (FO), 15 Feb 40).

 $^{^{21}}$ Pierlot's concern was shown by his unhappiness over Queen Wilhelmina's speech getting better publicity than his when both of them spoke on the first anniversary of the German invasion of their countries. FO 371/26330: C5274 (Aveling to Eden, 14 May 41).

Belgians as well as the British, because Oliphant was much more impartial towards the Belgian factions.²²

After a difficult first year in London, the Belgians had overcome much of the initial British scepticism about them. Reduced British xenophobia, skilful Belgian media publicity and the persuasiveness of a few key individuals had improved the image of the exiles. The substance that sustained the better image, however, was based more on the vigorous actions of the Belgian government itself than on external influences.

Part 2. Setting a New Course

Heeding the principle that a house divided against itself cannot stand, Pierlot and his cabinet started to pull together the unravelling strands of Belgian policy and diplomacy as soon as they arrived in London. Efforts by stubborn royalists in the military and the diplomatic corps to continue a policy of neutrality were counteracted within the Belgian exile community. On the world stage, agreements and proclamations were made to confirm a renewed Belgian commitment to fight the Axis until a full Allied victory was achieved. Carefully guarding what he considered to be his legal mandate from King Leopold III, the Belgian constitution and the 1939 national election, Pierlot refused for political and personal reasons to add new ministers from outside that mandate to his cabinet in spite of British and Belgian pressure. In spite of personal shortcomings, Belgian Parliamentary Office criticisms and organisational problems, the Pierlot government represented permanence and the continuity of power according to the Belgian constitution.

The Belgian exile government worked hard to improve its image

²² FO 371/26375: C14412 (Oliphant to Eden, 6 Nov 41); /30785: C4517 (Oliphant to Strang, 28 Apr 42), /38868: C11234 (Oliphant to Eden, 25 Aug 44); FO 432/6: 135 (Oliphant to FO, 6 Jan 40). Oliphant (1881-1965) retired in 1944, later becoming Anglo-Belgian Union honorary vice-president. WWW, 6:854.

with the British government and the Belgian exile community. The first policy that was announced was that the Pierlot cabinet of four would continue to lead a full Belgian war effort alongside the British against Germany. Two days after reaching London, Pierlot and Spaak met with Halifax while Gutt announced to the British public on the BBC:

....We are the only legal Government of Belgium, and nobody, according to our Constitution, can set up another either in occupied Belgium or elsewhere. What is the aim of our Government? The liberation of Belgium and the liberation of our King who is a prisoner of war; the restoration of our country's territorial integrity and her independence....²³

Two weeks later, the Belgian government decided that a state of war existed between Belgium and Italy, based on blatantly hostile Italian acts in Belgium, Africa and neutral waters. Public announcement was delayed until November, to give Belgian Congo authorities time to intern appropriate Italians in that colony. In early December, Spaak sent a letter to Belgian diplomats explaining the legal basis of the government's assuming full executive powers and the state of war with Germany and Italy.²⁴

Spaak then cautioned or disciplined errant diplomats while de Vleeschauwer went to the Belgian Congo to reassert central government control over the huge colony that had been in the unusual position of making independent decisions for five months. Spaak's biggest challenge came from Comte Louis d'Ursel, an old career diplomat with strong ties to the Belgian royal court, who was serving as ambassador in the important political communications centre of Berne, Switzerland. D'Ursel had sent a message on 6 September 1940 to several other Belgian legations repeating the royal court's strong preference for neutrality instead of continuing the war. Ambassador Cartier (in London) and former Prime Minister Georges Theunis (in the USA) had sent their own messages to fellow diplomats to counter

²³ Van Langenhove, *Garants*, 153-4; Boelaerts, "Archives," 306.

 $^{^{24}}$ FO 371/24286: C12452 (Halifax to Aveling, 19 Nov 40), C12505 (de Vleeschauwer to Ryckmans, 22 Nov 40); CREH, 1LD (Spaak to Belgian legations, 6 Dec 40).

d'Ursel's arguments, making Spaak's job easier later. D'Ursel was finally pressured into silence in February 1941 after Belgians in London, the United States and even Brussels advised him to keep quiet. It took two more years to fire the recalcitrant ambassador, due to Swiss reluctance to recognise a successor without credentials approved by King Leopold III.²⁵

The Belgian cabinet was the first of the exiled governments in Britain to place itself in a state of war with Italy (21 November 1940), and even followed British actions of war or broken diplomatic relations with countries that did not directly threaten Belgium or the Congo, such as Japan (20 December 1941) and Germany's east European allies (February-April 1941). Belgium legally bound itself to the worldwide Allied cause against the Axis in the United Nations Declaration of 1 January 1942; this action and other joint allied activities will be covered in more detail in Chapter IV. Belgium's large gold loan to Britain in early 1941 saved the British from a financial fiasco until American lend-lease assistance became effective; this action happened after unsuccessful attempts to get loans from the Dutch and Norwegians, and will be analysed in Chapter III.

The Pierlot government's ability to move so strongly into the Allied war effort would have been much weaker if it had not tamed Belgian exile political passions from 1940 to 1942. The struggle to rally strong and fractious politicians was a wartime achievement of the Pierlot government that deserves closer examination. Obstacles that made the political amalgamation of the Belgian war effort more difficult included strong personality differences ranging from Pierlot's torpid conservatism to Huysmans' caustic radicalism,

²⁵ Stengers, *Léopold III*, 132-7, 149-55, 167-9. In addition to denouncing the Pierlot government, the D'Ursel message stated that Belgium was no longer at war with Germany. Shirer, *3rd Republic*, 746. Chapter III covers De Vleeschauwer's efforts in the Congo. FO 371/24286: C13415 (Hailey Mission to FO, 11 & 28 Dec 40).

 $^{^{26}}$ FO 371/32420: W4749 (MOI to FO, 25 Feb 42), /32421: W6221 (FO table, 27 Apr 42), W7522 (US State Dept Press Release No. 59, 7 Feb 42).

overbearing pressure from the Belgian and British Left that produced instinctive counteractions, and the general insecurity of all the Belgian politicians as they strove for both wartime and postwar advantage.

Prewar Belgian governments had been fragile and short-lived. The main political parties (Catholic, Liberal, and Socialist) had created various joint compromise governments that tended to shuffle politicians in and out of government to such an extent that they were viewed with scepticism by the querulous Belgian electorate and the cautious British cabinet. Pierlot, Spaak, Gutt and de Vleeschauwer were only in the same government of national unity because of the wartime German threat, but they worked together with great mutual respect. On the other hand, each of them had a strong personality that did not always mesh with the others, and Spaak in particular felt awkward as the only Socialist minister from late 1940 to mid-1943.27 Spaak wanted to expand left-wing influence in the Pierlot government, but even Churchill's personal talk with the Belgian premier in December 1940 did not change Pierlot's resistance to enlarging his decision-making group. Aveling's intrigues and the Belgian Parliamentary Office's proposed Government Council merely increased Pierlot's defensive "fortress mentality" against sharing power.28

Foreigners and their British hosts shared the danger, determination and long working hours of wartime London. As Eaton Square in the Belgravia district filled up with Belgian government offices, the Belgian exile cabinet became more comfortable with making progressive changes. The Foreign Office staff felt that the Pierlot quartet was the only hope of a satisfactory solution to the Belgian problem, so they officially let the "miserable ministers"

²⁷ Van Aal, *Télémemoires*, 9-11, 153-6; FO 432/6: 135 (Oliphant to FO, 6 Jan 40); FO 371/24274: C6191 (Oliphant to Halifax, 30 Apr 40).

 $^{^{28}}$ FO 432/6: 194 (Aveling to Halifax, 18 Oct 40); PREM 3/69A: 84 (WSC (Churchill) to FO, 13 Dec 40); 87-9 (Halifax & HD to WSC, 30 Nov & 6 Dec 40).

sort out their own internal problems.²⁹ Camille Huysmans, the formidable head of the BPO, pushed often and loudly for the expansion of the Pierlot government's decision-making power. His powerful personality and political achievements gained him the respect and support of British Labour politicians, but the Foreign Office mistrusted him and was concerned about more turbulence in the legal government headed by Pierlot if large new personalities were wedged into small jobs that were contrary to the Belgian constitution.³⁰

Continuing pressure in London and the problem of what to do with four of Pierlot's ex-ministers who had escaped to Portugal in October 1941 brought the issue of government expansion to a critical point. Pierlot and Gutt in particular were against reinstating any ministers who had resigned in August 1940, especially as it would set a precedent for others such as Jaspar. However, Pierlot's continuing concern for their welfare and political potential prompted him in early 1941 to ask all eight of his isolated and inactive former colleagues in Vichy France to come to Britain. In addition, there were 14 Belgian cabinet discussions about the ex-ministers from September 1941 to April 1942.³¹

After lengthy discussion, publicity and favourable Foreign Office reaction, the 18-person *Conseil Consultatif* was finally officially established on 11 February 1942. It had been operating informally since October 1941 as an advisory body composed of top political leaders, deputies, senators and ex-ministers who dealt with

 $^{^{29}}$ Stengers, Leopold III, 128; FO 371/24277: C12083 (FO to Buckingham Palace, 7 Nov 40).

 $^{^{30}}$ Camille Huysmans was a controversial parliamentary deputy, mayor of Antwerp and president of the Second Internationale (an international socialist-Marxist body with links to the Belgian Socialist Workers Party and the British Labour Party). FO 371/24277: C12382 (BritEmbB to FO, 11 Nov 40), C12469 (Aveling to Halifax, 18 Nov 40); /26335: C141 (Huysmans to Attlee, 30 Dec 40). A measure of his political stature was his 70th birthday party, attended by Spaak and two top Labour Ministers (Dalton & Greenwood). \it{BI} , 5 Jun 41.

³¹ FO 371/26335: C11037 (Aveling to FO, 3 Oct 41), Kathleen Devolder, *Procès-verbaux du Conseil des ministres* (Bruxelles: Archives générales du royaume, 1994), 95-110 passim; CREH, LA 2 ("Zero 04," 15 Sep 41).

general Belgian exile concerns. A smaller, higher-level council of six was set up on the same day to advise the cabinet on major policy questions. It was composed of exiled Ministers of State and ex-Prime Ministers in Britain or the United States. These two groups provided more representation of the major Belgian political parties, which lessened friction and opened new channels of discussion for the four ministers still directing the government. Another important step in February 1942 was the creation of three undersecretaries of state with administrative powers in their departments and advisory rights at cabinet meetings. The undersecretaries were a major step in creating a broader political and decision-making base for the exile government: Julius Hoste was the first Liberal and the second Fleming, Henri Rolin was the second Socialist, and Gustave Joassart was the first Resistance representative.³²

The final barrier to enlarging the decision-making group was overcome in late 1942 and mid-1943, when three of Pierlot's exministers were placed in new offices. Several types of pressure made this necessary and possible. Belgian exile bureaucracy had grown to meet increasing obligations, while more politicians and other leaders were reaching Britain with energy and talent that needed to be used, and the strain of trying to handle too great a workload was affecting the four ministers who had run the government since October 1940.³³ Antoine Delfosse, Pierlot's Minister of Communications when captured by the Germans in 1940, had escaped from Belgium and was made
Minister of Justice and Information in October 1942 in recognition of his Resistance connections and direct knowledge of conditions in

³² FO 371/30808: C1734 (Oliphant to FO, 14 Feb 42); PRO, Admiralty (ADM) 199/615 (Oliphant to Eden, 30 Mar 42). All of the cabinet advisors were part of the 18-person *Conseil*; ex-Premier Georges Theunis spent most of his time in the United States on high-level diplomatic duty.

³³ Gutt in particular was having health problems, and had been advised by doctors to leave London for a rest at least once in 1942, and de Vleeschauwer's reluctance to delegate responsibility also led to concern by medical and political experts. FO 123/563: 1219 (de Selliers to Aveling, 10 Apr 42); FO 371/38879: C6941 (Shepherd to FO, 16 May 44). Belgian exile bureaucracy and difficult wartime working conditions will be discussed in Part 3.

occupied Belgium. Two other former ministers, Auguste de Schrijver and Auguste Balthazar, had escaped from France in late 1942, but they were not reinstated in the government until 6 August 1943, during Pierlot's last cabinet expansion while in exile. Herlot's stand against adding men who did not have the usual electoral and constitutional mandates to hold office in his cabinet was certainly reinforced by the fact that most of the pressure came from left-wing politicians whose doctrines and personalities were incompatible with his own.

Another Belgian government action for harnessing exile political talent was the creation of the Commission belge pour 1'étude des problèmes d'après-guerre (CEPAG). Under the leadership of ex-Premier Paul van Zeeland, this group issued many position papers from August 1943 to March 1944 on post-liberation topics such as Belgian economic recovery and reforming the printed media, professional organisations, air transport, and the political powers of communities and provinces. A great number of government offices were required in and near London's Eaton Square by 1944 to house agencies handling the diverse concerns of the Belgian exiles.³⁵

Even though Pierlot had greater political support in Britain and Belgium by 1944 than he did in 1940, he remained very sensitive to possible threats to his hard-won gains. A routine speech by Churchill on 24 May 1944 brought out Pierlot's insecurity in a way that surprised the British by its intensity. The House of Commons listened to a review of events and relations with Europe that mentioned Belgium in the same sentence with Denmark, instead of in another sentence with Norway and the Netherlands. The British

³⁴ Pressure from increasing workloads and the positive opinions of Spaak and de Vleeschauwer persuaded a reluctant Pierlot to reappoint the three ministers. The two Augustes had proven still capable and loyal on missions to Canada and the USA 1942-3. FO 371/30768: C8585 (Oliphant to Eden, 2 Sep 42); van Langenhove, Garants, 215. Two other escaped ex-ministers were not reinstated. FO 371/26335: C11037 (FO (Strang), 7 Oct 41).

³⁵ Over two dozen offices housed ministries, the Central Refugee Service, CEPAG, State Security, Red Cross and Merchant Marine staffs. CREH, LO 3 and LA 4 (Services du government belge a Londres, n.d.).

premier had listed Belgium and Denmark together merely because their monarchs were German captives, but the nervous Belgians had construed being mentioned separately from their fellow exiles in London as a demotion in their status in Whitehall. Eden did his best to calm the Belgians, but Pierlot insisted on seeing Churchill personally. Only after a private reassurance and a public explanation by means of a parliamentary question to Churchill was Pierlot satisfied that Belgium's official position was still strong with the British.³⁶

The British treated the smaller allies more casually than they did the Americans and Russians, giving the exiled governments in London reason to be insecure about some issues where their interests did not match those of the major powers. Also, the positive Anglo-Belgian connection during the First World War also had negative aspects for the Pierlot government. One drawback was that the example of King Albert I and British losses in Flanders from 1914 to 1918 created postwar expectations in London of continued Belgian gallantry and gratitude. Churchill in particular was bitter about Belgian actions between October 1936 and August 1940, and a close prolonged look at the squabbles of Belgian politics during the Pierlot exile did not raise his opinion of King Leopold III or Belgian politicians.37 Most of Pierlot's successes in London were based on improved relations with British citizens other than the primary resident of No. 10 Downing Street. It is time to look closer at more ordinary British and foreign citizens during the Belgian exile in Britain.

³⁶ Being pressured at this time to resolve the misunderstanding, minor in the British perspective, could not have improved Churchill's personal feelings about Pierlot, especially since Pierlot knew the invasion was imminent. FO 954/44: 3 (Eden to Oliphant, 26 May 44); FO 425/422: C7548 (Oliphant to Eden, 5 Jun 44); Paul Kronacker, Souvenirs de paix et de guerre (Paris: Fayard, 1973), 101.

³⁷ Jan-Albert Goris, *Belgium in Bondage* (NY: Fischer, 1943), 207, 211; Churchill, CHAR 9/121 (Aldersbrook speech, 16 Oct 36), 9/140A (Commons speech, 4 Jun 40); PREM 3/69A: 58-9 (Churchill to Eden, 27 May 44).

Part 3. Settling In

Most of the Europeans who were graciously given refuge from Hitler's terror by the British were civilians who were lucky enough to be joined in exile by their national governments. These regimes were able to acquire resources in varying amounts from national treasuries and other overseas assets, as well as from sympathetic compatriots and organisations, usually in the United States and hard-pressed Britain.

The large group of Belgians was fortunate to have ample supplies of funds, individual initiative and an effective support network. These assets were stimulated by the revival in London of the Belgian government in late 1940. Building on previous efforts by the Belgian Parliamentary Office and embassy, Pierlot and his administration created the Central Refugee Service, Belgian Institute and labour exchanges. Schools and cultural activities were also part of Belgian social services throughout Britain. Other exiled nationalities established similar support systems. Belgian achievements in generous benefit payments and in fishing activities were noted by the British, while the Belgians admired the volunteer spirit and the determination of their hosts.

Britain was not an easy place to live during the Second World War, especially for foreigners in London. Wartime shortages, German bombs and the aloof reserve of the English in general made the city a stressful home for newcomers. Selective hospitality based on social class and nationality meant that exiles often had to rely on each other as they tried to cope with a decline in London courtesies and mood due to exhaustion, as well as the British tendencies to "muddle through" problems involving education, housing and health (especially if it did not affect the upper class).³⁸

³⁸ Londoners were least hostile to the Dutch, who benefitted from effective professional publicity and the respect given to their queen. Many older citizens remembered First World War Belgian exiles as a "dirty lot," and so stayed biased against their 1940 successors. Philip Ziegler, London at War 1939-1945 (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995), 94, 110, 171, 213-8; Clive Ponting, 1940: Myth and Reality

The initial chaos and inadequate bureaucracy of the Belgians developed into a much improved system by 1941, similar to the progression of their British hosts. After King Leopold III's surrender in the summer of 1940, the Belgian exiles were frustrated by the souring of British opinion toward them and by the lack of assistance and direction from the disoriented embassy staff. To help fill the gap in official assistance, the BPO used their own funds to assist many Belgian exiles during the last half of 1940, set up a meeting place as a forum for venting frustrations, and founded the Diamond Polishing Company with skilled exiles from Antwerp.³⁹

The Belgian embassy's administrative information office and ad hoc emergency fund developed into the Service Centrale des Réfugiés (SCR) by September 1940. One of the early tasks of this agency was **co**ordinating with county and town committees to keep track of Belgians and their mail dispersed to over 400 locations in Britain. Most Belgian exiles were confused and uninformed about official Belgian activities and policies, so the SCR helped to create a bilingual Belgian exile newspaper in December 1940. The Ministry of Information and the embassy argued over editorial control of the journal; a compromise allowed it to print apolitical Belgian news without being a stilted Pierlot or British propaganda sheet.⁴⁰

With the assistance of foreign donations and the British Women's Voluntary Service, the SCR developed varied activities within a year, including a clothing distribution centre, four transit houses and a nationwide network of 145 liaison agents to keep in touch with Belgian exile families, schools, merchant marine and fishing crewmen

⁽London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990), 138-45; Kronacker, Souvenirs, 73.

³⁹ FO 371/24275: C7547 (de Sausmarez to Aveling, 3 Jul 40), /26335: C285 (Aveling to Eden, 10 Jan 41); Carlo Segers, *Donnez-nous un champ de bataille* (Bruxelles: Pierre de Méyère, 1959), 22-3.

⁴⁰ No Allied exile newspapers had complete editorial freedom. La Belgique Indépendante/Onafhankelijk België was non-partisan, and became less afraid to criticise the British or report government problems by 1944-45. FO 371/ 24281: C9622 (FO (Lambert & Makins, 6 & 11 Sep 40); CREH, LK 2: 1 (22 Sep 41).

and military units.⁴¹ By early 1942, the SCR took over the total cost of maintaining Belgian refugees while continuing to use British staff for the paperwork needed for those billeted by the Ministry of Health or in requisitioned houses. Belgian living subsidies exceeded the rates paid by British unemployment assistance, which concerned the British government. Many Londoners of all classes resented the charity and jobs given to Allied refugees. The other Allies did not begrudge the Belgians, as recipients were in a small group of the elderly and women with children; most Belgian men and women without children were working.⁴²

The Belgian Red Cross was active in Britain from May 1940, and eventually set up a system of dispensaries, school clinics and free meals, social welfare and message services, POW clothing drives and homes for expectant mothers, convalescents, invalids and the elderly. Belgian patients in British hospitals were visited by Belgian Red Cross volunteers and received small packages and a journal in French or Flemish every two weeks. Working with the British Red Cross, the Belgians sent nearly 2600 packages of food or clothing a year to their POWs in Germany, while by 1942 over 180,000 messages were transmitted or received annually between Belgians in Britain and the rest of the world.⁴³

The Belgians were the fourth largest group of exiled civilians in Britain, and were one of several governments who benefitted from British or other overseas assistance. The British Council helped to set up national cultural houses in London, and provided most of the funds for the Czech, Greek, Polish and Yugoslav institutes. The

⁴¹ Although 90% of the 1940 Allied refugees started their exile in London, many fled the 1940-1 German bombing attacks. By mid-1941, Allied exiles were evenly divided among London, S.E. England and the rest of Britain; most Belgians stayed near London. CREH LK 2: 1 (22 Sep 41); FO 371/29218: W10679 (CCWRHBF meeting, 19 Aug 41).

⁴² FO 371/29219: W15280 (CSR-Ministry of Health (MOH) meeting, 5
Dec 41); HO 213/555 (MOH, 5 Dec 41 & 18 Feb 42). Example weekly
benefits in post-1971 British pence for a single adult/married couple
/infant: 90/150/20 (CSR) vs. 62/118/15 (MOH); P. Ziegler, London, 95.

⁴³ CREH LK 3: 4-19; Marcel Wolf, "The Belgian Red Cross," Message, no. 27 (1944): 38-9.

Belgian Institute was the largest of the national houses with 1600 members, providing activities such as lectures, meals, English classes and concerts for exiles from both Belgium and Luxembourg. The national houses supported multinational activities as well, and their usefulness to Allied personnel in London even continued for a time after the war ended.⁴⁴

Allied Red Cross activities cooperated closely with the British Red Cross and the St. John War Organisation's Foreign Relations Department in helping POWs, notifying next-of-kin of Allied forces casualties, and providing civilian medical help in occupied and liberated countries in Europe. One of their most difficult tasks was locating missing relatives because of forced wartime moves, destruction of documents and the use of aliases. Allied casualties were given access to some British Legion facilities and free prostheses from the Ministry of Pensions. The War Organisation even operated four Allied convalescent homes in Belgium between November 1944 and March 1946. 45 Funding for many of these worthy activities came from governments in Britain, the Dominions, exiles with adequate funds (Belgians, Dutch and Norwegians) and hardworking volunteer and charity agencies in Britain and the United States. Included among the prominent women helping Allied relief organisations was Margaret Biddle, wife of the helpful American ambassador to the Allied exile governments.46

⁴⁴ The total of alien civilians in Britain grew to over 274,000, divided as follows (thousands): Russians (44.1), Germans (42.5), Poles (19.2), Belgians (18.5), Austrians (14.5), Dutch (14.4), Norwegians (12.3), etc. HO 213/588 (Census, 31 Mar 44); PRO, British Council (BW) 108/1 (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 17 Nov 42; BW, Oct-Nov 1942, 21 Dec 42, 1 Feb 43, Fall 1943, 11 Apr 44).

⁴⁵ P.G. Cambray and G.G.B. Briggs, Red Cross and St. John War Organisation 1939-1947 (London: Sumfield & Day, 1949), 81-3, 452-66 passim, 651-4; CREH LK 2: 1 (22 Sep 41).

⁴⁶ CREH LK 2: 6 (1945); A.J. Liebling, "The Omnibus Diplomat," Profiles vol. 2 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1944), 89; Roger Jacquemin, Le Chemin de Londres (Bruxelles: Renaissance du Livre, 1945), 152; BI, 24 Apr 41. The British Women's Volunteer Service and Belgian-American Relief Fund were especially important for 1940-41 Belgian relief efforts; 1940-44 cash gifts to the Belgian Refugee Relief Fund totalled over £100,000. BI, 14 Dec 44.

For most Belgian exiles individually, life was lonely and difficult during the 1940-41 period when relief and labour agencies were still organising. The embassy backed the repatriation requests of four Belgian men in July 1940, but the Foreign and Home Offices opposed returns to occupied Europe due to probable repercussions affecting refugee policy and Allied recruiting. However, applications five months later to return special case women and children to Belgium or France were approved by the Foreign Office and Admiralty.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, by October 1941 all group repatriation plans had failed due to lack of transport or suitable havens; most of those involved would have to make the best of an indefinite stay in Britain.⁴⁸

In the summer of 1942, the Ministry of Labour signed agreements with the exile governments to manage centrally the placement of Allied civilians into the British war industry work force. Anglo-Allied labour exchanges had been established in early 1941, primarily to place men and women in industrial trades and personal and domestic services. Willing Belgians gladly went to work or training centres for needed skills and English language instruction, and were looked after by powerful patrons, such as Camille Huysmans and Louis de Brouckère, with ties to top Labour party leaders. By October 1941, 82% of the men and 28% of the women eligible for work had jobs; 16 months later, the respective figures were 96% and 77%. Professionals and intellectuals had more trouble finding work. Research laboratories and many universities had difficulty filling staff shortages with foreigners due to their work on secret government projects or their location in Alien Protected Areas. Poles, Czechs

 $^{^{47}}$ FO 371/24285: C7777 (BelgEmbGB to Passport & Permit Office, 23 Jul; latter to FO, 26 Jul; FO (Lambert), 31 Jul 40, /25254: W12598 (Between Waldock & Steel, 20-22 Dec 40).

⁴⁸ FO 371/26350: C2471 (FO (Mackenzie), 11 Mar 41), C11607 (FO (Grey), 28 Oct 41). In June 1941, the U.S. ended new visas for those with close relatives in occupied Europe, fearing the exiles could be coerced into spying. The Congo's humid climate and lack of suitable housing made it a poor choice for mass European settlement. FO 371 /29221: W7598 (Overseas Settlement Dept, 12 Jun 41), W7823 (BritEmbUS to FO, 18 Jun 41), /29213: C5064 (Spaak to Aveling, 21 Apr 41).

and Belgians in particular were affected by the tough policy on granting Aliens War Service Department work permits.⁴⁹

While the adults were forming organisations or going to work, over 1200 Belgian children were going to Belgian and British primary and intermediate schools. Camille Huysmans, a former Minister of Public Instruction (among many other political offices), headed the committee overseeing Belgian education in Britain, and ensured that necessary help was available from the British Council, Ministry of Health and university faculties. Several hundred older students went to industrial trade schools in Hammersmith, a fishing school in Brixham, and secretarial and administrative schools. Half of the male university students joined the armed forces in 1941, but a few of the men and most of the women continued their studies. Among the latter was Pierlot's daughter, studying British history at Oxford. 50

In keeping with the paraphrased maxim that all work and no play makes a dull exile, the Belgians made time for recreation in spite of wartime shortages and restrictions. Limited availability of petrol and tyres, laws against foreigners owning motor vehicles or detailed maps, and restricted access to much of the coast and southeast England made travel very difficult. Armed forces clubs, dance halls and cinemas were available in some locations, but Belgian military personnel did not get much time off duty until 1942, after unit discipline and British attitudes toward aliens had improved. London was the entertainment mecca for both the military and civilians. Intellectual pursuits such as lectures, concerts by the Belgian Quartet, variety shows such as the On les aura revue cabaret and special exhibits such as the one for the 300th anniversary of the Flemish painter Van Dyck enriched the drab lives of many Londoners.

⁴⁹ FO 371/32202: W11116 (FO (Ward), 11 Aug 42); HO 213/514 (HO Aliens Dept, 21 Oct 40). Huysmans was the incumbent president of the Socialist International, while de Brouckère was a past one. By early 1943, over 10,700 Belgian men and women were part of Britain's labour pool. *BI*, 13 Feb, 6 Mar, 23 Oct 41, 11 Feb 43.

 $^{^{50}}$ CREH, LP 5 (<code>Onafhankelijk België</code>, 29 Sep 42); <code>BI</code>, 14 May 42; Cammaerts, MS-800/II: 242 (Pierlot to Cammaerts, 29 Nov 43).

The Anglo-Belgian Club was formed in early 1941, and offered snacks, a library and English language classes.⁵¹

Less intellectual pursuits were also available. Inter-Allied military soccer teams were such a success that exile soccer leagues were formed. Less wholesome entertainment was provided by women such as the notorious "Piccadilly Commandos" who naturally congregated wherever there was a group of military personnel with money to spend. At least ten Belgian priests were listed in the London area for those who needed confession after a wild weekend or spiritual reinforcement after wartime trauma. Priests were also important for Belgian Catholic masses (Te Deums) on special days such as National Day (21 July) and Armistice Day (11 November), as well as for the many funerals that are always part of war.⁵²

Away from the glitz and blitz of London, the hum of war factories and the cramped camps of the military, lived a distinct group of Belgian families engaged in the vital work of fishing. The Belgian fishing fleet in Britain was the largest one (225 boats) from the Continent, and was spread out from the Dartmouth-Brixham area (Devon) to Milford Haven (Wales) to Fleetwood (Lancashire). The smaller boats were based in the southern ports for fishing near the English coast, while the larger boats were in the north for better access to grounds near Iceland. With the most modern fishing fleet in Europe, the Belgians were a welcome addition to the critical effort to get food to crowded British cities. The Belgians were treated on an equal basis with British and other Allied fishermen with regard to fishing limits and grounds, although the British were concerned that the newcomers' old gear might not be suited for

 $^{^{51}}$ Leon & Vera Devos, interview by author, tape recording, Swanley, Kent, 15 Aug 95; $BI,\ 26$ Dec 40, 27 Mar, 25 Sep, 18 Dec 41; Vers l'Avenir, 3 May 41. Other Anglo-Belgian clubs were also opened outside of London; the London club was still active 50 years later.

⁵² Belgian military soccer players were very successful, winning the Allied Nations Cup twice and playing a powerful British military team to a draw in 1944. David Reynolds, *Rich Relations: The American Occupation of Britain 1942-1945* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), 202; *BI*, 7 Aug 41, 26 Feb, 9 Apr, 30 Jul, 5 Nov 42, 13 Apr 44.

different operations at their new fishing grounds.⁵³ However, the 1100 energetic Belgians not only overcame most equipment problems on their 3-to-18 day fishing trips, but they also developed new techniques and trained new crew members in Brixham at the transplanted Ostend School for Fishermen. 125 students completed day and night courses there in seamanship, navigation, fishing techniques, signals, engine maintenance and the Flemish language in the school, which had been established with the help of the British Admiralty and Board of Trade.⁵⁴

However, even a vital industry such as fishing could not escape intrusion by the military. Brixham was taken over by D-Day invasion shipping in January 1944, and Newlyn's fishing fleet was pre-empted in May. By mid-1944, over half of the fleet that had reached England from Flanders in 1940 was on contract to the Admiralty for use in coast patrol, minesweeping, and boom and balloon barrage defence. The input of Belgian fishing crews freed British ones to join the Royal Navy, and soon Belgian fishermen were joining the Section Belge of the Royal Navy themselves. That part of the exiles' story is covered next in Part 4, where the first phase in creating new Belgian and British military forces after the defeats of 1940 is discussed.

Part 4. Forging a New Sword

Belgian military units, like their government, were latecomers to Britain compared to the other exiled Allies. The precedent of other Allied units, and the desperate circumstances that forced the

 $^{^{53}}$ FO 371/24283: C7244 (FO-Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 12 Jun & 21 Dec 40), /29217: W5346 (Devon Police to HO, 17 Jan 41 & CCWRHBF to FO, 1 May 41); BI, 5 Oct 44; News from Belgium (NY) 2 (1942): 22.

⁵⁴ Boys as young as 13 went to the Brixham school to get qualified as members or mates of fishing trawlers. The smaller Belgian boats were the first to catch sprat close to the English coast, and they continued to work after the British fishermen had stored their lines for the season. *BI*, 10 Feb, 28 Dec 44; *News* 2 (1942): 22; Arthur Lamsley, "Belgian School for Fishermen," *Message*, no. 32 (1944): 25.

⁵⁵ BI, 5 Oct 44; ADM 208/25: 66, 79.

British to welcome them, must be reviewed first to provide a better perspective on all Allied forces in Britain.

The general principles of inter-Allied military cooperation between Britain and the exiled Allies were set up by the summer of 1940, easing the creation of the small units in the Belgian contingent later in 1940 (army battalion) and during 1941 (navy section and RAF squadron). Grouping individuals in national units in Britain in the Second World War was a natural development from the human tendencies to congregate with others of the same culture and to promote members' morale by accomplishing actions that would promote national pride (waving the flag, parades and ceremonies, shared danger in combat). By studying the process of preparing the Belgian exile contingent during the 1940 to 1944 period, one can gain a better general understanding of the limitations, hopes and cooperation that were part of the rejuvenation of all of the Allied forces in Britain.

Precedent for distinct Allied units had been set in France by five Polish and Czechoslovak army divisions, and was transferred to Britain when elements of two of these divisions reached England in June 1940. Polish fighter squadrons had also served in France, and their survivors formed two RAF squadrons in time for the peak of the Battle of Britain (15 September 1940); they were joined by a Canadian and a Czech squadron as well. Five Polish Navy ships had also been based in Plymouth since September 1939. National military weakness after the Dunkirk evacuation motivated the British to assimilate foreign forces into a condinated defence against German attacks much more quickly than would have been possible or acceptable in less desperate circumstances. 56

However, the British were still cautious with foreign military personnel, especially from countries that had been occupied by the

⁵⁶ Thomas, Volunteers, 4-11; Richard Bickers, The Battle of Britain (London: Salamander, 1990), 135.

Germans and who had formally joined the Allied cause only after being invaded. British hesitation about Allied units in the summer of 1940 was understandable, but self-defeating. A British admiral summed up the problem very well:

Under existing conditions, allied aliens are generally left in enforced idleness and are subject to irksome restrictions. The inference to them must be that we regard this war as <u>our</u> war, and not their war, and that we do not require their help....By our own inaction, if it continues, we shall transform men, who might be of tremendous value, into useless or even dangerous characters.⁵⁷

The unprecedented circumstances in the summer of 1940 of thousands of friendly foreign soldiers seeking asylum in Britain required a change in popular and legal attitudes. On 22 August 1940, Parliament passed the Allied Forces Act, which allowed exile governments to form their national forces with internal administration and discipline separate from the British military. This was a major change, but also a logical progression from the Emergency Powers Act of 28 September 1939, which allowed aliens, individually or in a group, to join any British military force as officer or enlisted personnel. After Americans were exempted from the oath to the crown in August 1940, Allied nationals were also given this option.⁵⁸

The Air Ministry decided to treat Allied airmen in almost the same way as British fliers, allowing them just enough access to secret publications to enable them to do their jobs. Many top RAF commanders were opposed to entire units of Allied personnel, preferring to scatter foreign aircrews throughout British units. The support of Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, leader of Fighter Command, in forming more Allied national squadrons was vital in winning acceptance of this concept. Dowding's practical instincts led him to feel that the Allied fighter pilots he badly needed would

 $^{^{57}}$ ADM 1/11230 (ADM (Stephenson), June 1940).

⁵⁸ Polish Air Force Association (PAFA), *Destiny Can Wait* (London: William Heinemann, 1949), 310; AHB, *Manning Plans*, 229.

have better morale and motivation if they flew together.⁵⁹
Concentrating foreigners at fewer locations would also reduce the number of bilingual instructors and flight commanders necessary to get new Allied talent into the air against the Germans. This be principle had to applied carefully, however, as the RAF soon learned that aircrew members such as Czechs, Poles and British often did not mix well on the same aircraft or in a flying formation.⁶⁰

The Royal Navy was just as doubtful about foreigners in the early summer of 1940 as the Royal Air Force was. Due to the alleged "defeatist spirit" in the Dutch and Norwegian navies, the navy recommended keeping those foreign ships away from the North Sea or important British ports. This policy was modified after Dunkirk, but the larger Dutch warships were still sent to the West Indies in spite of good reports about their conduct and efficiency. 61

The British Army in the summer of 1940 was not only too disorganised to be of much help to the Allied exile ground forces, but many soldiers were unhappy with the RAF for its perceived lack of air cover at Dunkirk and its subsequent heroic status during the Battle of Britain. Two years were required to reorganise British army divisions into more mobile formations, by which time live fire exercises, tough inspections and specialised battle schools had become common. General Montgomery in particular was well known for flushing out staff officers into the field and for pushing the

⁵⁹ AIR 14/1075: 11A (HQ Bomber Command to HQ 2-6 Gps., 21 Jun 40), 29A-C (Douglas-Portal, 22-27 Jun 40), 37A (AIR, 14 Jul 40), /1104: 16A (HQ Bomber Command to AIR, 30 May 41). Over 2000 Polish aircrew members were in Britain by July 1940, expecting to form national squadrons based on French precedent and British agreement with the Poles. Not forming new RAF national units could have been disastrous for morale among these exiles. AIR 2/4184: 93B (RAF Bomber Unit Reorganisation, 7 Feb 41).

⁶⁰ AIR 2/7196: 23 & 28 (AIR, 3 & 4 Jun 40); AIR 14/1075: 73B (A.M. to Lees, 30 Jul 40).

⁶¹ The situation with French sailors, on the other hand, was delicate and confused, especially after the RN attack on 3 Jul 40 against French warships at Oran. Many of the Frenchmen wanted to be repatriated, so Polish crews took over some of the smaller French warships seized in British ports. ADM 199/615: M12454 (ADM (ACNS), 24 May 40) and M15068 (ADM (DOD[H]), 8 Jun 40); PREM 3/43: 43 (CAB W.P.(40) 281, 22 Jul 40); Mercer, Chronicle, 102.

distraction of a family life out of the division areas. 62

By 1942, the tough British emphasis on the battlefield effectiveness of officers in particular provided a useful example for the exiles that made clearing out unfit and surplus officers from Allied army units more possible and palatable. Other hard-won lessons also helped British liaison officers to Allied ground units provide effective advice to help their foreign comrades deal with similar problems. Two years of resolving British Army disciplinary problems caused by bitterness and frustration from dull routines, frequent idle time and family worries had been turbulent, but full of valuable lessons that enabled all of the armies in Britain to renew themselves. 63

The achievement of integrating several foreign forces into British operations can be better understood and appreciated if the process is analysed from the beginning. The development of the Belgian forces provides a good example of how cooperation and patience can overcome cultural problems and shortages to create effective military units from humble beginnings.

In the summer of 1940, scattered Belgian soldiers, airmen and sailors made their individual ways to Britain. Their most common characteristic was their determination to revenge the death, damage and cruel occupation inflicted on their country twice in 26 years by Germany. Because of King Leopold III's surrender and their government's ambivalent actions between June and October 1940, neither the Belgian embassy in London nor the British were certain of their future with the Allies. Belgian airmen, followed later by sailors, were placed individually in British units while the soldiers

⁶² Army-air force animosity was still high at the end of 1940, so when the 3rd Division was in an RAF leave town (Cirencester), huge fights broke out between the two groups. David Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983), 84-7; Brian Horrocks, *A Full Life* (London: Leo Cooper, 1974), 96-8.

 $^{^{63}}$ PREM 3/43: 43 (CAB W.P.(40) 281, 22 Jul 40); Lt Col J. Sparrow, Morale (London: War Office, 1949), 6-8.

⁶⁴ FO 371/24285: C7628 (PREM to FO, 28 Jun 40).

languished in their quarters in the small town of Tenby in south Wales during the summer and fall of 1940. The creation of Belgian flying squadrons and warships will be discussed in Chapter V, but the foundation of the rejuvenated Belgian army in particular from 1940 to 1941 needs to be analysed as an integral part of the new beginning created by all the Belgians during their early years in exile.

It is not surprising that the several hundred Belgian soldiers, airmen and sailors in Britain by August 1940 were confused, bitter and discouraged. The shock of defeat in battle and the division between their captured commander-in-chief (King Leopold III) and their exiled government hit the Belgian military the hardest, making their perseverance and eventual resurgence even more remarkable. Although the Polish, Czechoslovak, Dutch, Norwegian and French exiles had also been defeated by the Germans, only the Belgians had a split between their legal head of state (King Leopold III) and head of government (Hubert Pierlot). In the summer of 1940, neither national leader blazed a path for them to follow to Britain. In spite of the early threat of a Belgian court-martial and the death penalty later proclaimed by the Germans, a few individuals such as the 163 Belgians evacuated from Dunkirk refused to give up the fight against the hated Kun.65

British anger at the surrender of the army of "gallant little Belgium" affected Belgians in uniform as well as civilians, and early arrivals at the camp in Tenby were brought there under guard. The Camp Militaire de Regroupement Belge at Tenby was established at Tenby on 27 May 1940, and continued to grow in spite of difficulties with British scepticism, low morale and inadequate supplies. The wide variety of the soldiers' backgrounds, lack of uniforms and the high proportion of officers and technicians hindered progress in trying to get regular infantry units set up. By 22 July, Tenby had 69 officers

⁶⁵ Michel Donnet, Flight to Freedom (Shepperton, UK: Ian Allan, 1974), 16; Belgian Information Office (BIO), Thirty Questions about Belgium (London: Lincolns-Prager, 1942), 24; J. Lee Ready, Forgotten Allies, (Europe) (Jefferson, USA: McFarland, 1985), 1:17.

and 369 other ranks, most of whom were already bored and restless.66

Fortunately for the Belgian government and army, Lieutenant General Chevalier Victor van Strijdonck de Burkel was available to rally the dispirited troops from his Tenby headquarters in the Atlantic Hotel. This general had retired in 1938, was recalled in the fall of 1939 and became a military district commander. He was in France on a liaison mission when the Germans invaded Belgium and cut him off from his garrison. Luckily for the Belgian government and army, he was able to reach England early enough to provide motivated and experienced leadership to soldiers who definitely needed it. He moved to Tenby to lead the soldiers out of their despair by taking care of their professional and personal needs, including small things such as bringing shoe polish and cigarettes to the barracks to let the men know that he cared about them. Van Strijdonck also insisted on keeping his men busy, so on 28 September his small unit was assigned coast patrol duties along part of the south coast of Wales. This sign of trust, and the interaction between British and Belgian soldiers while guarding the coast, gave the lonely Belgians a feeling of acceptance and hope for the future.67

On 8 October, the 1st Belgian Fusilier Battalion was formed with Major Charles Cumont as its commander, and soon afterwards a military judge advocate system was set up. These actions helped to bring legitimacy and discipline to the uneasy and divided group of soldiers at Tenby, as did the arrival of uniforms. By November, soldiers were getting a complete general infantry training regimen of intramural sports, individual combat skills and gas warfare. Weekly morale training was also given by company commanders, covering topics

⁶⁶ A British nurse even jeered wounded Belgians in an army convalescent ward at the end of May 1940; luckily, this petty behaviour was soon stopped. Devos, Interview; "The Belgian Army In Britain," *The Army Quarterly* 45 (1943): 235-7; PREM 3/43: 43 (W.P. (40) 282, 22 Jul 40).

⁶⁷ John Tipton, Tenby during World War II, 2nd ed., (Narberth, Wales: Tredeml, 1991), 6-7; "Belgian Army in Britain," 235, 237; Luc Schepens, De Belgen in Groot-Brittanhië (Brugge, Belgium: Orion, 1980), 122; Vers l'avenir, 30 Nov 40.

such as moderation in drinking, respect for others, saving money and getting along with the British. 68 General van Strijdonck added a few practical aspects of being a good neighbour, such as insisting that his men learn English and participate in town defence efforts such as filling sandbags. As a result, relations between the Belgians and townspeople were excellent. For his role in creating Anglo-Belgian harmony, General van Strijdonck was made an honorary Freeman of the Borough. 69

The first Christmas in exile for the Tenby soldiers was made merrier by the welcome extended to them by local British families.

Camille Gutt, then Minister of National Defence, shared his Christmas holiday with the troops at Tenby as well. During this time, he persuaded some concerned officers that they could be loyal to both the exiled government and King Leopold III. General van Strijdonck's example of loyalty to the government and the Allied cause, while remaining a true professional Belgian officer, also improved attitudes in the battalion.⁷⁰

To increase the strength of Belgian forces in Britain, the exile government decided in December 1940 to conscript all Belgian males in Britain aged 19 to 25. This group soon proved too small to fill the ranks in Tenby, so the age and location criteria for conscription were expanded a month later to include men aged 18 to 45 in Britain. All Belgians aged 16 to 45 in countries with Belgian diplomatic representation were to register with the local legation to form an overseas recruiting pool.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Guy Weber, Des hommes oubliés (Bruxelles: Louis Musin, 1978), 22; Schepens, De belgen, 129; CREH, Serie E (Armée Belge), 7E 3 (12 Oct & 3 Dec 40).

⁶⁹ Tenby, like many small wartime British towns, had its own Home Guard (1940-44) as well as many transient military units. Tenby hosted a British brigade and several battalions (1940-43), as well as three American divisions (1943-44). Tipton, *Tenby*, 6-8, 17-9.

 $^{^{70}}$ CREH, 7E 3 (28 Feb 41); Gutt, Carrefour, 46; Vers l'avenir, 11 Jan 41; Devos, Interview.

 $^{^{71}}$ ADM 199/779: M24100 (FO to Cartier, 17 Dec 40); FO 371/26352: C2549 (Moniteur Belge, 17 Feb 41).

In February 1941, the Belgian soldiers began to reap the benefits of a hard winter's work. The 1st Fusilier Battalion formally received its own flag from Prime Minister Pierlot on 15 February 1941 in an important ceremony recognising its status as a permanent unit. Four days later, British audiences received a favourable report on the battalion, which was broadcast by British reporters who had visited Tenby and Penally at the beginning of February. By the end of the same month, an artillery battery and armoured car squadron were created, establishing the basis for an independent Belgian force combining different combat arms. 72

On 1 July 1941, the 2nd Fusilier Battalion was established at Great Malvern, Worcestershire, with the primary purpose of training and liaison. The 1st Fusilier Battalion left Tenby during the same month to consolidate its scattered infantry companies with the artillery battery into one area around Carmarthen in south Wales, while the armoured car squadron moved to Great Malvern. By this time, 1600 men were armed and wearing uniforms with the "Belgium" tabs at the top of their sleeves.

The Belgian high command then reorganised itself, with General van Strijdonck becoming the Inspector General of Belgian Forces in Britain, while newly-arrived Major General Raoul Daufresne de la Chevalerie became commander of Belgian land forces. In London, the inspector general supervised the consolidated military staff of four (later six) sections. The matters handled by these sections included job assignments, finance, discipline, intelligence, marriage approvals and the invalids home.⁷⁴

This reorganisation was followed by the Anglo-Belgian armed forces agreement of 5 September 1941. The key benefit of this

 $^{^{72}}$ CREH, 7E 3 (31 Jan & 14 Feb 41), 8E 3 (Gen Marius Louche, ca. 1984); Weber, $\textit{Hommes},\ 23.$

⁷³ Charles, Forces, 65-6; Weber, Hommes, 22; F. Van Daele, "L'historique de l'escadron d'autos blindées de la Brigade Liberation," Revue de documentation militare (Bruxelles) 9 (1946): 47-50.

⁷⁴ CREH, 2LC2: 5-6.

arrangement was the improved training and increased supervision of the Belgian land forces by the British Army. Belgian armed forces were to be employed for future actions leading to the liberation of Belgium, and would be used for the defence of the United Kingdom in the meantime. Ultimate command would be British under the auspices of the Allied high command. Belgian land units would be commanded by Belgian officers and would have Belgian regimental colours and insignia. Organisation, uniforms, equipment and training practices would be British. Personnel of the Belgian Air Force would individually join the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR), serving in regular RAF units. Qualified Belgian naval or maritime officers would be commissioned individually in the Royal Navy Reserve components. Most of the other ranks would serve in a special Section Belge of the Royal Navy.75

The September 1941 agreement was based on the efforts of the Belgians on land, on sea and in the air, as well as the previous experience of the British with other small Allies. Other Allied airmen and soldiers also served under similar agreements, as did most of their sailors. For better understanding of the foundations of the entire Belgian exile war effort, it is necessary to look beyond Tenby to the airfields and coastline of England to analyse the progress of several hundred Belgian airmen and sailors.

Between 24 June and 5 August 1940, 124 Belgian aviators and flight students reached Britain from France and North Africa.

Because of their familiarity with British aircraft and procedures, 29 pilots and observers were quickly sent to man Fighter Command Hurricanes and Coastal Command Blenheims in the Battle of Britain.

Belgians flying from England shot down their first German aircraft on 11 August 1940. One of the Belgian pilots, Flying Officer Jean

 $^{^{75}}$ FO 123/555 (Gutt to Aveling, 10 Oct & Dutry to Aveling, 15 Oct 41); FO 371/26340: C11374 (Anglo-Belgian agreement, 5 Sep 41).

 $^{^{76}}$ Anglo-Polish agreements in Nov 1939 and Aug 1940 set precedence for similar ones with other exiled Allies. AIR 2/4184: 46B (Anglo-Polish agreement, 5 Aug 40); ADM 199/615: M7133/42 (FO-Dutch MFA agreement, 5 May 42).

Phillipart, became an ace by shooting down five more Germans before going down in flames himself two weeks later. Seven Belgians died during the Battle, while 21 German aircraft were downed by Belgian pilots.⁷⁷

As more French-speaking aviators arrived in Britain, a Franco-Belgian Flying Training School was established in October 1940 at Odiham, Hampshire. English language training was emphasised to prepare the students for flying or aircraft maintenance in the Royal Air Force. Due to language or cultural differences, other Allied air forces also had their own schools, such as the Polish Initial Training School at Brighton and their Technical Training School at Halton. Belgians followed the normal training and elimination process of the Empire Training Scheme after meeting English language standards. 20-40 percent were eliminated in initial flight training (12 flights); the rest went on to a flying school in Canada for 18-24 months. Two or three more schools in Britain were needed to make a pilot proficient enough in a particular aircraft to overcome the challenges of aerial combat and survive. 78

The Belgians did as well as any other group, but the long training time required delayed the formation of their own national squadrons. For example, 69 cadets in the displaced Belgian flying school came to Britain in August 1940 from Oudja, Morocco. An average member of this group with five months of previous Belgian training did not reach his fighter squadron until October 1941, 14 months later. Another training factor that delayed Allied flying student progress was the scarcity of school spaces; British students and foreigners with excellent English skills were given priority, as they could earn their wings faster. The flying student backlog was later reduced after many Belgian and other Allied pilots were

⁷⁷ Ameye, Dans la RAF, 12, 31-32, 38; News 2 (1942): 23, 47.

⁷⁸ Air Ministry Air Historical Branch (AHB), Manning Plans and Policy (London: Air Ministry, 1958), 230; AIR 2/8238 (DAFL 1 to AIR, 21 Jun-20 Sep 42); Ameye, Dans la RAF, 100-2.

selected as instructors, usually after combat tours in Fighter or Coastal Commands. 79

The use of Allied pilots in national squadron leadership positions was also delayed by the RAF policy of starting even the best and most experienced fliers at the lowest rank (Pilot Officer), regardless of their previous foreign rank. Non-commissioned officers all started at Sergeant. 80 Belgian pilots lacked the special camaraderie and pride of their own national squadron for over a year, but they received and gave inspiration and flying skills to their British and Allied comrades in other units. Their impact on Belgian events would grow later, as they formed the senior cadre in Belgian air force activities and passed on their hard-won experience of working within the RAF and surviving aerial combat against the Germans to their compatriots.

Meanwhile, Belgian seamen were proving themselves worthy of respect in the Royal Navy. By the fall of France on 22 June 1940, only a few naval vessels and personnel from Belgium's tiny Corps de Marine had made it to England. Victor Billet, a Belgian merchant marine captain, contacted the British Ministry of Shipping on 4 July 1940 with an offer to recruit Belgian ships in Southampton for the British war effort. He was censured by the Belgian Shipping Advisory Committee for doing this, and further informed by the Belgian Embassy that his idea of forming a naval corps from the numerous fishing boats that had escaped was not feasible. Another factor against forming a Belgian naval group was the ongoing effort of the Admiralty to place several Belgian trawlers under civilian contract to patrol the English Channel or to anchor floating barriers in river

⁷⁹ Roger Anthoine and Jean-Louis Roba, *Les Belges de la R.A.F.* 1940-45 (Bruxelles: Collet, 1989), 11, 39, 42; AIR 2/5152: 8 (AIR, 22 Jun 40). The most active Belgian instructor pilot was probably F/Lt Willy Van Lierde, who had over 250 students (mostly Belgian, French and British) from 1941 to 1945. Angèle Kneale, ed., "Half a Victory," (TMs, Isle of Man, UK), 102, 119, 125-9.

⁸⁰ Ameye, Dans la RAF, 15-7.

mouths.81

Not content to let Belgium be underrepresented in the war at sea, Billet began pestering the Admiralty to man some Royal Navy (RN) ships with Belgian crews. After several weeks, he got the support of Admiral Sir Gerard Dickens, RN Liaison to the Allied fleets. After being commissioned in the RN Volunteer Reserve, Lieutenant Billet recruited 30 fishermen and took them to HMS Royal Arthur, a Royal Navy basic training base at Skegness, Lincolnshire. This site was a former Butlin Holiday Camp, where other "tourists" from the Norwegian and Free French forces were also introduced to the non-holiday activities of naval life. When the first class of Belgian seaman recruits graduated from HMS Royal Arthur in November, they entered the Royal Navy on an equal footing with their British classmates under arrangements made in September 1940 with the Admiralty. 82

Part 5. Conclusion

The successful revival of the Allied forces in the United Kingdom would not have been nearly as coordinated or lasting without the liaison system and the gracious behaviour of individual British men and women in and out of uniform towards the exiles.

British military missions to Allied forces had been operating as liaisons well before the arrival of the exiles in Britain. Staff officers had been attached to the French forces soon after war broke out in 1939, and had even visited Belgium discreetly in January 1940 for staff discussions and reconnaissance of potential airfields and defensive positions to be used in response to a Belgian call for assistance against a German invasion. British liaison headquarters were established with each of the Allied exile ground forces in Britain as they regrouped and expanded. Close British-Allied

⁸¹ Anrys, *Congé*, 36, 61-2, 70.

⁸² Jo Gerard, Hervé Gerard and Gustave Rens, eds., Se battre pour la Belgique 1940-1945 (Bruxelles: Collet, 1984), 45-49; Anrys, Congé, 69-73, 111-2.

coordination continued throughout the training period before the Allied forces returned to the Continent; Liaison HQ No. 2 was attached to the Belgians. 83

A military mission was even sent to the Belgian Congo in 1940, and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter III. Starting in 1942, the Allied training and liaison system expanded primarily for officers, who were sent to British military schools and command headquarters to learn British techniques and organisation. Allied ground forces were also attached to larger British units for short training periods from 1942 to 1944. This process, covered in Chapter V, improved standardisation and professional communication among the forces that would be fighting together later under British high command on the Continent. Military mission operations involving the Belgians expanded as Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF) grew during the preparations for, and the campaigns after, the invasion of Normandy in June 1944; these activities will be analysed in Chapter VI.

Bonding between the British and Allied militaries was also accomplished by other means besides training and liaison duties. The Royal Navy distributed cigarettes and food at Christmas to crews of all Allied navy ships, as well as the RN Section Belge and civilians on ships on contract to the Admiralty. Another informal military bonding process between the British and the Belgians was created by the veterans of the First World War. An annual memorial service at St. Paul's Cathedral united "Old Contemptibles" with their Belgian and French counterparts. The old Belgian veterans also made life easier for their younger successors by serving as technical instructors and staff members in the Belgian invalids home. Both generations of Belgians joined together for their National Day ceremony at the Cenotaph in London's Whitehall, a unique privilege

 $^{^{83}}$ WO 208/2046 (WO(MI3), 4 Jan; WO(MI1), 20 Aug 40); WO 32/10026 (WO, 16 Feb 44).

among the exiled Allies.84

On a less official level, a Belgian pilot was deeply impressed by listening to his national anthem (among others) on the radio after a speech by King George VI; he and his English hosts for a family Christmas dinner all stood at attention for the playing of *God Save the King* and the *Brabançonne*. After receiving a surprise Christmas gift from a British acquaintance, F/Lt Willy Van Lierde noted in his diary,

"There's no denying it; the British are a kind people. All the marks of friendship extended to me from the start have been a great comfort to me, and made my exile a little easier. I shall never forget their kindness and, more than ever, I am glad I came here." 85

Even someone as hostile to the Belgian leadership as Winston Churchill extended his condolences to Hubert Pierlot when the latter lost two sons in a British train accident; their correspondence was a little friendlier after that. 86

The British also tried to strengthen their image as the European bastion of freedom and justice through official diplomatic activities, in order to get crucial financial and economic help from both sides of the Atlantic. The Inter-Allied Conference at St.

James' Palace in London on 12 June 1941 proved that it was easier to make joint declarations than it was to develop joint policies. The conference of prime ministers and foreign ministers from Britain and the exiled Allies, as well as high commissioners from the Dominions and observers from the Free French, was delayed by diplomatic differences and distracted by national and personal idiosyncrasies. It showed that Britain would have to continue completely directing strategy and operations for the exiled Allies, but the conference did

 $^{^{84}}$ ADM 199/803: M19093/41 (ADM to CinCs, 1 & 16 Dec 41). The special Belgian ceremony at the Cenotaph was a privilege granted by King George V in recognition of bonds from the First World War. Veterans of the "contemptible little English army" of 1914 fought beside the French and Belgians in Picardy and Flanders to halt the scornful Germans. $BI,\ 20$ Mar 41, 30 Jul 42, 27 May & 24 Jun 43.

⁸⁵ Kneale, "Half a Victory," 46, 54-5.

⁸⁶ CAC, CHAR 2: 28 (Pierlot to Churchill, 5 May 41).

produce a joint public resolution on the following points:

- 1. Continue fighting Germany and Italy together until a final victory was won.
- 2. No separate peace would be made by any of the Allies until all peoples subjugated by the Axis were free.
- 3. The only basis of an enduring peace would be the willing cooperation of free peoples to share economic and social security.⁸⁷

This resolution was broadened later by the United Nations Declaration on 1 January 1942; this will be discussed in Chapter IV.

Dealing with the exiled Allies was always a challenge for the British. They were usually gracious hosts, especially in sharing limited space and resources during the hardest war years of 1940 and 1941. However, they tended to treat the exiles more casually than they did the Americans or Soviets. The Belgian government worked hard to improve its tarnished image after 1940, but they were still prone to much private and public quarrelling, and had the longest diplomatic privilege list in spite of having so few government ministers.⁸⁸

Another factor that made British and Belgian diplomatic relations more intricate was the Belgians' ambiguous politicomilitary relationship with their neighbour Luxembourg. Touchy about its independent status, Luxembourg did not want to be ignored because of its small size or prewar economic union with Belgium. However, the small duchy made itself even less prominent by dividing its military participation between the Belgian and British forces, while its government and royal family were split between London and Montreal. To make diplomatic transactions with Luxembourg even more confusing, the duchy relied on both the Netherlands and Belgium for

⁸⁷ The domination of many conference discussions by General Sikorski, prime minister of Poland, created resentment among other Allied leaders. PREM 3/45/3: 22 (Allied resolution, 12 Jun), 24 (Table diagram, 12 Jun), 26 (PREM, 12 Jun), 43 (WSC to Roosevelt, 7 Jun 41); Butler, Strategy 2: 263-4, 560.

⁸⁸ Goris, Bondage, 211; Anthony Powell, Faces in My Time (London: Heinemann, 1980), 162; FO 371/26330: C9505 (FO (Mackenzie), 6 Aug 41).

diplomatic assistance.89

In evaluating the achievements and difficulties of relations between Britain and the smaller Allies during their first years of exile, it is not difficult to find specific instances where things could have been done better. However, the British and the exiles worked well together most of the time in developing an effective mutual war effort. It must also be remembered that British choices were influenced or limited by the support needed or provided by the United States or the Soviet Union. Disappointments were rarely caused by malice; a much more common factor was the inherent stress caused by differences in culture and perspective, as well as the wartime threat to their respective homes. These ancient problems were deplored 3,000 years ago in Psalm 137: "How shall we sing a song to the Lord in a strange land?" 90

⁸⁹ The Belgian artillery had many Luxembourgers. Powell, Faces, 167; FO 371/24285: C8270 (FO (Lambert), 12 Aug 40), /40387: U986 (Hood to Horner, 12 Feb 44). The foreign minister of Luxembourg arrived in Britain on the same aircraft with Pierlot and Spaak on 22 October 1940, adding another mental link to Belgium for the British. Georges Heisbourg, Le gouvernement Luxembourgeois en exil 1940 (Luxembourg: Imprimarie Saint-Paul, 1986), 167, 182, 207, 210-2, 215.

⁹⁰ Goris, Bondage, 244.

Chapter III: Reinforcements from Overseas, 1940-1944

The power and prestige of the Belgian government during its exile in London were greatly enhanced by the wealth it possessed in the Belgian national gold reserves and in the resources of the Belgian Congo. These treasures were used generously for the Allied cause, as was Belgium's other major overseas resource, its modern merchant fleet. Thanks to the mineral and agricultural wealth of the Belgian Congo, the Pierlot government was able to finance the Belgian war effort without using up its gold reserves. In addition, soldiers from the huge colony formed the first force under a Belgian flag to strike back at the Axis after the Germans occupied Belgium and France in 1940.

This chapter will analyse the interaction among the British, the Belgian exiles in Britain, and the Belgian leaders in the Congo.¹ Although the Belgians were willing to share their gold and the Congo's resources, they insisted on getting fair deals and good prices in return. The Belgian government in London was sometimes caught in an awkward position between the profit-oriented and powerful businesses in the Congo and the British, who were looking for bargains and a compliant source of natural wealth. Another area where the Pierlot government often differed with Whitehall was in military operations, in which Belgian desire for national pride through success in battle did not match the British army's strategic concerns. Other Belgian exile disappointments included the inability to get more replacements for their torpedoed merchant ships or to get the defensive weapons they wanted for the Congo.

The Belgian exile ministers negotiated carefully with their London hosts and their American ally, because they were concerned

[&]quot;Congo" here means the Belgian colony with its capital at Leopoldville; after independence in 1960, these names were changed to Zaire and Kinshasa during the rule of President Mobutu. French Equatorial Africa and its southern part (Middle Congo) will be referred to by their capital, Brazzaville. This town became the capital of the Republic of the Congo in 1960.

that they would have to account for their conduct and their use of national resources to their demanding and businesslike compatriots and king after Belgium was liberated. Also, their judicial training and political instincts ensured that they would be careful with the fine print of Allied-Belgian agreements in order to serve Belgian national interests.² On the other hand, their sincere desire to help the Allies defeat the Axis and reconstruct their liberated homeland made them more flexible than they might have been during peacetime.

National interests sometimes caused the Belgians and other small Allies to play off the British and Americans against each other; competition for products from the Congo in particular provided opportunities for this. The increased importance of the Congo in world affairs gave dominant business interests in the colony more leverage over the remote Belgian government in London, while also exposing the Congo to unprecedented contact with the British, Americans and South Africans. Most of these contacts were maintained by sea, where over a dozen freighters with mixed crews of Belgian and Congolese were a major part of the shipping that carried supplies, raw materials and people into and out of the Congo.³ Wartime Belgo-American relations were primarily economic and usually focused on trade with the Congo, so most of the interaction between the two governments will be analysed in the section of this chapter dealing with the resources of the colony.

Much of the Belgian government's influence was based on the Congo's vast wealth in minerals, agriculture and manpower. Because of its key role in Belgian activities, the challenges and assets brought to the Belgians and the Allied war effort by the Congo must be analysed to understand fully the achievements and frustrations of

² Pierlot and de Vleeschauwer had law degrees from Louvain, Spaak and Gutt from Brussels. Van Aal, *Télémemoires*, 9-11; *Biographie Nationale* vol. 40 (Bruxelles: L'Académie Royale, 1978), 703.

³ Caucasians in the Congo were usually transitory residents, so they will be referred to by their "home" nationality, such as Belgian. African inhabitants of the colony will be referred to as natives or Congolese. The latter held lower-ranking positions in the Belgian merchant marine as well as colonial ground forces.

the Pierlot government during its exile.

Part 1. Gold and Politics

Belgian leaders were fully aware how vulnerable their homeland was to German invasion, and so they were prepared to evacuate their government and national treasure when armed aggressors charged across their eastern borders for the second time in 26 years. The tortuous route of Pierlot and his key ministers to London was discussed in Chapter I, as was Albert de Vleeschauwer's early escape to London with extraordinary powers to preserve the Congo and its resources for Belgium. The struggle between the feisty Administrator-General and powerful groups in the Congo will be analysed in this part of the chapter, as will the sometimes adversarial relations between insecure Belgian leaders and their British and South African neighbours.

The Belgian gold reserve, the world's fourth largest in mid1940, was the most valuable resource possessed by Pierlot and his
ministers during their first winter in Britain. £87,000,000 of
accessible Belgian gold bullion supported both Pierlot and Churchill
during the early days of their guest-host relationship, so its role
will form the first part of this chapter.4

After a year of war, the British realised that they faced short-term national bankruptcy. In late August 1940, British gold and U.S. dollar reserves of £490,000,000 were estimated as adequate for only four more months of imports at wartime rates. Churchill wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, privately stating that he would soon be unable to pay cash for shipping and supplies into Britain. The collapse of Britain's vaunted financial strength surprised Roosevelt. After a few weeks of analysis to confirm the

⁴ Belgian gold was worth £179/\$720 million in May 1940; £42 million was sent to the U.S.A., and nearly £50 million was temporarily lost when placed in unreliable French hands. Goris, Bondage, 8; PREM 3/69A: 148 (Bevir to Churchill, 24 Jun 40). £1= \$4.03= Congo/Belgian Franc 176.625 (1940-45) D. & G. Butler, British Political Facts 1900-1985 (London: Macmillan, 1986), 386; FO 93/14: 130, 146 (Anglo-Belgian agreements, 21 Jan 41 & 5 Oct 44).

crisis predicted by Churchill, the president developed the idea of lend-lease in December 1940 to keep war materiel flowing into the struggle against Hitler. Even though continued supplies for Britain would benefit American industries and impede the progress of totalitarian aggressors hostile to American democracy, suspicious isolationist and anti-imperialist groups in Congress had the potential to make legislation to help the British Empire difficult to enact. Nearly three months of investigative hearings to determine the advisability and support for the Lend-Lease Act were a time of anxiety and embarrassment for the British, whose financial weakness was gradually proven to the Americans. During this time, the U.S. was tough on the British; one reason for this was to show that the eventual approval of the Lend-Lease Act on 11 March 1941 over strong opposition by isolationists had not been inevitable, nor was the approval for an indefinite period. The Americans insisted that the British liquidate all possible assets before getting aid; they also cut arms sales to Britain, and seized British gold bullion worth over £50 million from South Africa in December 1940 and March 1941. In the long term, however, lend-lease was a generous option that covered 54 percent of Britain's payments deficit in the Second World War. 5

During the tense winter when British assets in gold and dollar reserves dropped to approximately £3,000,000, the Belgian exile government came to the rescue of its hosts in London. The loan of £59,000,000 to the British was significant by its size, timing and uniqueness. This gold bullion was 68 percent of the reserve available to the Pierlot government at that time, and kept the British afloat financially at a time when national bankruptcy was predicted and American help was uncertain. The Treasury had pressured the Free French and all the exile governments in London for the use of all or some of the approximately £400,000,000 of their national

⁵ Clive Ponting, 1940: Myth and Reality (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990), 8, 209-14; David Reynolds, "Churchill the appeaser? Between Hitler, Roosevelt and Stalin in World War Two," in Diplomacy and World Power: Studies in British Foreign Policy, 1890-1950, ed. Michael Dockrill and Brian McKercher (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 208.

gold accessible from London during the autumn of 1940, but most of them held back all their gold for their own defence and reconstruction.

Negotiations between the Belgians and British over a possible gold loan started in October 1940, the same month that the Czechoslovak National Committee made a generous but relatively small loan of £7,500,000 to the British Treasury. The Chancellor of the Exchequer wanted to borrow all the Belgian gold in London, as well as the gold in the United States when the Belgians regained full control of it. Gutt replied that the Belgians would add their gold to the Allied war effort if others, especially the Dutch, did the same. He also wanted imperial economic preference within the British Empire and Dominions for goods from Belgium and the Congo during and after the war. The Treasury felt that trade concessions to the Belgians would hurt the Empire financially and prompt demands from other Allies, so the Foreign Office tried to placate the Belgians with vague promises.

Reconciling British reluctance and Belgian insistence for long-term commitments prolonged negotiations, as did Gutt's consultations with Belgian financial leaders in the U.S. In the meantime, the next most promising source of Allied gold was also frustrating the British. The Dutch wanted to use all of their gold (worth £23,000,000) to finance their war effort in Europe and to counter possible Japanese aggression against the Dutch East Indies, but they did not reject the British directly. Unacceptable Dutch counter-proposals made the British put negotiations on hold until talks with the Belgians were complete. The agreement detailing British access

⁶ H.Duncan Hall, North American Supply (UKCS) (London; HMSO, 1955), 278; R.S. Sayers, Financial Policy 1939-1945 (UKCS) (London: HMSO, 1956), 370-1. Even India and S.Africa refused to loan their gold. FO 371/25209: W12457 (Treasury to Phillips, 12 Dec 40).

 $^{^7}$ The term "imperial" usually means Britain, the Dominions and British colonies. Ponting, $1940,\ 214;\ FO\ 371/24276:\ C11260,\ (Gutt to Kingsley Wood, 16 Oct; CO to Treasury, 28 Oct; FO to BritEmbB, 22 Nov <math display="inline">40)$, /24286: C11053 (Kingsley Wood to Halifax, 12 Oct 40).

to seven million ounces of Belgian gold and a repayment schedule in gold with no interest was signed by Gutt and Sir Kingsley Wood, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, on 4 March 1941. This loan was large enough to keep Britain financially solvent until the "free" loan of American-funded lend-lease supplies could reach Britain.

Gutt continued to remind the British that he expected the Dutch in particular to sacrifice equally for the common good. Approval of Lend-Lease a week after the Anglo-Belgian loan agreement meant that war supplies at very generous terms could flow into Britain for the war effort, and getting more Allied gold was no longer urgent for Whitehall. Even though Britain replaced the Belgian gold in March 1943, well ahead of schedule, Gutt was angry that other Allies had not been pressured for "equality of sacrifice."

On the other hand, the Belgian Finance Minister had received better news in early 1941 concerning another issue involving the national gold reserve. On 5 February 1941, American courts awarded a lien by the Belgian government on Bank of France assets in New York equivalent to the amount of Belgian bullion lost through Vichy government wrongdoing. Pétain kept Belgian bullion worth £45,000,000 under Vichy French control in June 1940 instead of sending it to safety in the Western Hemisphere. Under pressure from Hitler, the Vichy government acquiesced in the Germans taking 200 tons of Belgian gold from a storage area near Dakar in French West Africa in 1942. Full repayment of the lost gold was arranged between the post-liberation Belgian and French governments in September 1944, completing Gutt's quest to preserve the bullion for Belgium's reconstruction.¹⁰

⁸ FO 371/24462: C11599 (Mackenzie (FO), 28 Dec 40), /26332: C1935 (Waley to Makins, 26 Feb 41); FO 93/14: 131 (UK-Belgian Agreement, 4 Mar 41).

⁹ FO 371/26332: C5819 (Aveling to Eden, 29 May 41); Sayers, Financial, 371, 455-7. Lend-Lease became effective 11 Mar 41; most of the initial supplies went to Britain. Mercer, Chronicle, 168.

¹⁰ Gutt, Carrefour, 62; Mallinson, Belgium, 126; David Kahn, Hitler's Spies (NY: Macmillan, 1978), 299.

Gutt was able to lend a large amount of gold to the British while having enough left to finance the long-term Belgian war effort because the Congo was a reliable source of gold and other profitable products. For example, sales of gold from the Congo in 1941 provided nearly £6,000,000 for Belgian government operations, and £7,000,000 more from the Congo financed the exiles' war effort in 1942.

Making use of gold and other products from the Congo was a complicated process affected by logistics, personalities, wartime priorities and delicate negotiations. The huge colony found itself in awkward new political and economic relationships with its African neighbours, Britain, the United States and its own exile government. Converting the perspective of the leaders in the Congo from peacetime routines to wartime priorities was necessary before the resources of the huge colony could be effectively harnessed to the Allied war effort. This conversion process will therefore be analysed first to provide a clearer historical setting in which to place the jewels of the Congo.

Getting the Congo to make the necessary economic and production changes to benefit the Allied war effort was a major challenge for Belgian and British leaders in London because of the unusual power of the large colonial mining, agricultural and banking companies.

Complicating the process was the short residency of most Europeans and the status of the Congo government as a shareholder in most of the important business concessions. In short, the profit motive was unusually strong in the Congo. The large companies and the government were quite interested in replacing commerce lost because of the war; Belgium alone accounted for 84% of the colony's exports and 48% of imports by value. Export and import trade with the United States and South Africa increased greatly, but the companies and Belgian government negotiated carefully with long-term markets and

 $^{^{11}}$ FO 371/30770: C4724 (Penton to Harrison, 5 May 42), /30777: C10306 (Logie to Fraser, 14 Oct 42).

the eventual restoration of links with Belgium in mind. 12

Another factor that made access to Congo resources more complicated for the British and Americans was the Belgian exile government's need to maintain prestige in both its homeland and its colony by maintaining an image of active control and independence. This meant not appearing too compliant with Allied demands, negotiating all significant price and quantity agreements in London, and ensuring that British colonies and South Africa did not gain a permanent advantage over the Congo. The business-oriented approach concerning the colony was also emphasised by the Belgian Chamber of Commerce in London, which published a journal touting the Congo's accomplishments and opportunities.¹³

It was fortunate for the Belgians and the Allies that the colony declared its continued loyalty to the government and the war effort against Germany after King Leopold's surrender on 28 May 1940. Governor-General Pierre Ryckmans made a radio broadcast on 2 June 1940 that stated the Congo's duty was to continue to wage war against Germany, and on 9 June he hosted a joint parade in Leopoldville of British, French and Belgian sailors and soldiers. Within two weeks of the parade, France had surrendered and the future of Britain and the isolated Belgian government seemed uncertain. It was not surprising that enthusiasm for the Allied cause waned in some parts of the Congo from June to October 1940. Nonetheless, Prime Minister Pierlot was determined to keep the Congo from falling under German or British control. He had therefore given Minister for the Colonies de Vleeschauwer full and independent powers on 18 June 1940 as the Administrator-General to keep the Congo and Ruanda-Urundi free for

¹² From 1940 to 1941 (by value), imports rose 300% from the U.S.
and 25% from S. Africa. Exports rose 200% to the U.S. and 65% to S.
Africa. FO 371/30776: C9096 (FRPS, 18 Sep 42), /34305: C5502
(Shepherd to Eden, 4 May 43).

 $^{^{13}}$ FO 371/30770: C4032 (Lincoln to Hogg, 11 Apr 42); Anglo-Belgian Trade Journal (ABTJ) 30 (1943): 22-4.

Belgium's long-term benefit. After leaving France the next day, the pro-Allied de Vleeschauwer had the formidable task of restoring supply links to the Congo and maintaining Belgian control of the distant colony himself until an acceptable Belgian government was formed in exile four months later; this was discussed in Chapter I.

Ryckmans was left mostly on his own between June and November 1940 to deal with political relations concerning the British, French and Italians. He wanted British assistance, but was extremely wary of the South Africans. The latter lived in the most powerful country in the region, and were eager to infiltrate the Congo for economic and military reasons. Concerned about Vichy influence in the French Congo, Ryckmans assisted the Gaullist coup in Brazzaville led by Col de Larminat in August 1940. The rest of French Equatorial Africa was rid of Vichy influence during the next two months, which removed a possible security threat just across the Congo River and allowed Ryckmans to concentrate on other problems. His colony was used to getting detailed policy and commercial guidance from the government and company headquarters respectively in Belgium, so many important decisions were delayed from June to November 1940 due to the Congo's reluctance to act independently. During this period, Belgian opinion in the Congo was divided between royalists who considered the government defunct and wanted neutrality, and those who recognised the government's continued existence but resented the apparent influence of Vichy France over it.15

British concern for access to the Congo's resources and strategic routes between northern and southern Africa led to the despatch of specialist teams from London to Leopoldville within two months of Pierlot's decision to stay in Vichy France. The prolonged stays of the 27-man military mission led by Lt Col Mackenzie and the

 $^{^{14}}$ Van Langenhove, $\it Garants$, 45, 171; FO 371/24282: C7109 (Hope-Gill to FO, 4 Jun 40).

¹⁵ FO 371/24282: C7230 (S. Rhodesia Governor to DO, 10 Jun 40; ConsGenl to FO, 14 Jun 40), /24286: C11079 (Econ. Msn. No.61 to FO, 16 Oct 40), C11297 (Hailey to Halifax, 29 Sep 40); FO 432/7: 31 (Joint to Halifax, 1 Nov 40).

economic mission led by Lord Hailey was an irritant to Ryckmans and de Vleeschauwer, who jealously guarded the Congo's interests against possible British domination. General support for the Allied cause and cooperation with the British missions increased after Pierlot resurrected the Belgian government in London in October 1940, but problems persisted with military issues in particular. 16

Many military officers in the Congo considered Italy an active enemy after Mussolini declared war on Britain and France on 10 June 1940. In response, many Italians in the Congo were quickly interned, communications links were established between Leopoldville and the British colonial capitals of Khartoum (Sudan) and Nairobi (Kenya), and meetings were held with British army officers in Africa. All of these actions seemed to be leading to joint activities with the British, making delays in military operations and expected British assistance frustrating to leaders of the Congo's Force Publique. Some of the senior officers had served in the Belgian colonial forces that had defeated forces from German East Africa in campaigns from 1914 to 1917, and were hoping to join British and French forces once more against their common enemy.¹⁷

Italian Abyssinia, only 350 miles from the northeast border of the Congo, presented both a possible threat and a convenient location for Congo military action on behalf of the Allies. The commander of the brigade in the northeast Congo, Lt Col Mauroy, was particularly vocal in his criticism of Ryckmans' lack of military action to support the British war effort against the Italians. However, the Governor-General could not allow the Force Publique to attack the Italians because Belgium was not at war with Italy in the summer and autumn of 1940. In addition, the low level of training and equipment in the Force Publique made it suitable only for internal defence at

 $^{^{16}}$ FO 371/24282: C7521 (DO to UK High Commissioner in S. Africa (HC in SA), 12 Jul 40), /24286: C11897 (Joint to FO, 4 Nov 40); FO 432/7: 31 (Joint to Halifax, 1 Nov 40).

 $^{^{17}}$ FO 432/7: 31 (Joint to Halifax, 1 Nov 40); BI, 27 Mar 41.

that time. 18

Pressure from the Force Publique increased on Ryckmans after the revival of the Pierlot government in London and the visit of the Free French leader, General Charles de Gaulle, to Leopoldville at the end of October. Due to Italian provocations and pressure from the Congo and the British, the Belgian government declared on 18 November 1940 that a state of war existed between Belgium and Italy. Official justification for this change in status were the Italian actions of seizing Belgian aircraft in North Africa, sinking the freighter Kabalo, and using air bases in Belgium to stage Italian air raids against London.¹⁹

Emboldened by the government's declaration and internment of more Italians in the Congo, Lt Col Mauroy led a small mutiny in Stanleyville on 23 November. He and the powerful League of Patriotic Action considered Ryckmans' policies toward the Italian colonies to be so timid that they harmed the Allied war effort in Africa. The Governor-General fired the reckless commander, but Ryckmans' need for higher-level reinforcement to quell other malcontents prompted his announcement that he would go to London for consultation with de Vleeschauwer. Realising that his indispensable subordinate was in deepening trouble, the Minister of Colonies told Ryckmans to stay in the Congo and wait for his impending arrival from London. De Vleeschauwer also announced that the Force Publique would join the British campaign against the Italians in Abyssinia; this eased the military pressure on Ryckmans. The War Office was willing to accept a token force from the Force Publique in the rear area of British operations, but neither they nor the Foreign Office wanted troops from the Congo in combat until they were better equipped and

 $^{^{18}}$ FO 371/24282: C7230 (FO-CinC Middle East, 17 & 24 Jul 40), C11016 (FO to Joint, 7 Nov 40).

 $^{^{19}}$ FO 371/24286: C12505 (de Vleeschauwer to Ryckmans, 22 Nov 40); FO 432/7: 42 (Joint to Eden, 21 Jul 41).

trained.²⁰ Subsequent Force Publique activities from 1941 to 1944 will be discussed in Part 4 of this chapter.

De Vleeschauwer's visit to the Congo from 5 December 1940 to 21 February 1941 set the tone for wartime relations between London and the Congo. He emphasised solidarity with Britain, but he also resented any major "outside" influence. Good relations with South Africa and nearby British colonies were necessary, however, so de Vleeschauwer made a point of visiting Cape Town and Nairobi during his first wartime journey to the Belgian colony.²¹

The Minister of Colonies voiced deep concerns to the Foreign Office about the activities and reports of British military mission officers in the Congo, even stating that several Congo leaders suspected British military involvement in the Mauroy mutiny in November. The lingering suspicion from the Mauroy incident was unjustified, but it contributed to the British decision in June 1941 to replace the overly-conspicuous Military Mission No. 19 with a low-key five-man liaison staff, also led by Lt Col Mackenzie. Another factor in that decision was the Belgians' unease by mid-1941 with the confusing mix of three military missions from Britain and South Africa that were operating in or near Leopoldville.²²

De Vleeschauwer was also concerned with restoring stability to the Congo's economic and financial activities. The war in Europe disrupted most of the Congo's traditional export and import trade because business communications with company headquarters and shipping links with Antwerp were broken. It took several months for

²⁰ FO 432/7: 42 (Joint to Eden, 21 Jul 41); FO 371/24286: C12186
(DO to UK HC in SA, 24 Nov 40), C12452 (Halifax to Aveling, 19 Nov
40), C12696 (Makins (FO), 16 Nov 40). After the Belgian government
was revived in London in Oct 1940, de Vleeschauwer reverted from
being an independent Administrator-General to his normal duties as a
cabinet member and Minister of Colonies.

 $^{^{21}}$ FO 432/7: 42 (Joint to Eden, 21 Jul 41); FO 371/24286: C13415 (Hailey Msn. to FO, 28 Dec 40).

²² FO 371/26347: C771 (Stowell to Makins, 9 Feb 41), C2543
(Military Msn. (MM) No.19 to WO, 26 Feb 41), C3513 (Joint to Eden, 26 Feb 41), C6897 (WO to MM No.19, 19 Jun 41). The Force Publique also established a mission in S.Africa in mid-1941. FO 371/26248: C8854 (MM Pretoria to WO, 6 Aug 41).

the British to develop plans for integrating the Congo's production and logistics links into the Allied war effort. The efforts of Lord Hailey's economic mission in the Congo from September 1940 to January 1941 raised business morale there, and facilitated the Anglo-Belgian Finance and Purchase Agreements of 21 January 1941. The Belgians were pleased that these agreements added the Congo to the British sterling economic area for the duration of the war, and gave preferential rates of customs duties to products from the Belgian colony within the British Empire. On the other hand, business leaders in the Congo were not happy that the weaker rate of exchange for the Congo franc made their products cheaper and less profitable in the controlled wartime market.²³

De Vleeschauwer returned to the Congo on 20 June 1942, and stayed until 28 October to persuade the big businesses to raise production levels and diversify items produced for the benefit of the Allied war effort. Concern about overinvestment in commodities such as rubber that might be unprofitable after the war caused resistance to government requests and quotas, as did diversion of labour and materials to military projects. Individual motivation to work at maximum capacity declined among Belgians, due to resentment at being unable to send food parcels to relatives in Belgium through the Allied blockade of occupied Europe under the Familibel program, and among Congolese because of reduced consumer goods in spite of increased wages. Pierlot himself visited the Congo during July and August 1942 (after an official visit to the United States) to promote production increases, assure the population of the government's concern and efforts for their welfare, and smooth over arguments

 $^{^{23}}$ FO 432/7: 31 & 42 (Joint to FO, 1 Nov 40 & 21 Jul 41); Walter Ford, Belgian Africa's Total War (London: Evans Bros.,1943), 11-2. The exchange rate for Congo products decreased from 120 francs (May 1940) to 176.625 francs (Jan 1941) for £1; the latter was also the rate for French francs. FO 93/14: 130 (Anglo-Belgian Congo Financial Agreement, 21 Jan 41); FO 371/24283: C7123 (Belgian agreements with Britain and France, 24 May-7 Jun 40).

between de Vleeschauwer and Ryckmans.24

Wartime stress, a punishing tropical climate, a cumbersome and exhausted bureaucracy, and concern for loved ones in Belgium were all causes for irritability in the Congo from 1940 to 1945. The Minister of Colonies' overbearing attitude and monopolisation of policy decisions caused lengthy delays in implementing necessary actions, as well as resentment by the powerful Governor-General. Both men favoured the Allies, but their suspicion of British imperialism, their strong personalities, and a reluctance to share power made them difficult to work with. 25 The Congo's administration was very centralised, with all important decisions involving the Governor-General personally. Appointment of a permanent advisory committee to the Governor-General did not seem to open up debate or decisionmaking, partly because de Vleeschauwer did not want the huge colony becoming too independent during the wartime period of reduced links with Belgium itself.26

Increased sharing of power in the Congo did not happen until 1944, when the Conseil de Gouvernement and provincial councils expanded representation from big business to include all classes, even native Congolese. Contributing factors to this change included greater confidence in Ryckmans by the government and greater American interest in Allied colonial policies. If Belgium wanted postwar aid, and the Congo needed postwar trade with the United States, political participation would have to expand from a small portion of the Belgian minority to include the natives. Traditional Belgian paternalism still dominated the new arrangement, as trade union and

²⁴ De Vleeschauwers's long Congo visits were partly motivated by his wife and children living in Elisabethville. FO 371/34304: C1873 (Shepherd to Eden, 30 Jan 43); FO 425/420: C3769 (Hope Gill to Eden, 21 Mar 42), C6540 (Oliphant to Eden, 29 Jun 42), /421: C8147 (Shepherd to Eden, 6 Jul 43); BI, 16 Jul 42.

 $^{^{25}}$ FO 371/30812: C3542 (Aveling to Harrison, 31 Mar 42), /34304: C565 (Oliphant to Eden, 13 Jan 43); FO 425/421: C8147 (Shepherd to Eden, 6 Jul 43).

 $^{^{26}}$ FO 425/421: C162 & C4296 (Shepherd to Eden, 21 Dec 42 & 7 Apr 43).

native representatives were chosen by the Governor-General from submitted lists. Even this did not please the large companies, who felt that Ryckmans should be replaced by someone less sympathetic to labour and professional associations.²⁷

Anti-British feeling developed in the Congo during 1942 because of the misperception that Britain was active only in pursuing imperial interests rather than fighting for the Allied cause. The civilian administration in Leopoldville was irritated with the number of British and South African officials sent to the Congo to increase access to the colony's resources and territory. At the same time, the Force Publique leaders noted cynically that British ground forces in Africa and Europe were active only in defending the British mandate and Suez Canal in Egypt. The new British Consul-General in Leopoldville, F.M. Shepherd, felt that the Congo leaders did not appreciate the British war effort or sacrifices, were unaware of how repressive the German occupation of Belgium was, and lacked an informed perspective of the Congo's role in worldwide Allied activities.²⁸

The parochial viewpoint of the Allied war effort by the Belgian leadership in the Congo was partly caused by de Vleeschauwer's tight grip on interactions between the colony and the outside world. For example, the Minister of Colonies rejected a British proposal in the autumn of 1942 to send a delegation from the Congo to Britain to give them a personal look at Britain at war. Even though de Vleeschauwer strongly supported the Allied war effort himself, he did not want a group visiting from the Congo to provide a chance for troublesome Belgian parliamentarians to demand reciprocal visits to "his" Congo.

²⁷ FO 371/34305: C4301 (Shepherd to Harrison, 6 Apr 43), /38880: C7942 & C8547 (Shepherd to Eden, 31 May & 7 Jun 44). Congo population (31 Dec 42, thousands): Belgians= 22.9 (0.2%), Other Europeans= 7.0 (0.1%), natives= 10,320 (99.7%). ABTJ 30 (1943): 40, 81.

²⁸ FO 123/569: 1398 (Shepherd to FO, 3 Nov 42); FO 371/26369: C10994 (Hope Gill to Hamilton, 11 Sep 41). The Congo had only ground units, and no experience with German blitzkrieg or occupation. It is understandable that the colony did not appreciate the requirements and hazards of naval warfare in the Atlantic, air war over Europe, or amphibious landings against strong opposition.

This unhelpful attitude toward outsiders was also shown by leaders in Leopoldville, who gave the Anglo-American Cadbury-Day mission as little information as possible in the latter part of 1942. The small mission was sent to analyse supply requirements for the Congo, but Ryckmans and de Vleeschauwer felt its only purpose was to create stricter import limits.²⁹

The antipathy became mutual, as the British criticised rising salaries and prices in the Congo as "blackmail," derided the Vice Governor-General for his personal quirks and opposition to an antisubmarine air base, and warned the United States that there needed to be one Anglo-American voice to prevent the Congo playing them off against each other. Fortunately for those living in the colony, most of the Anglo-Belgian antagonism was generated outside the Congo. British Consul-General Shepherd and his press attaché Bagot Gray were positive influences for the Allied cause in the Congo region, and got along with the Congo leadership, as well as de Vleeschauwer.³⁰

Anglo-Belgian relations concerning the Congo improved during 1943. In the political and economic spheres, improved British mission coordination and propaganda helped to improve understanding of Allied wartime needs in the Congo, and increased production brought praise, profit and confidence to the colony. Victory over Rommel in North Africa and successful invasions of Sicily and Italy earned the British and Americans great respect in the Congo, and also provided a winning cause to stimulate more production and less complaining. The Force Publique leaders were pleased that one of their brigades was finally sent to North Africa during the summer. By mid-1943, production in the Congo was close to maximum capacity

 $^{^{29}}$ FO 123/569: 1398 (Shepherd to FO, 3 Nov 42); FO 371/34304: C1873 (Shepherd to Eden, 30 Jan 43).

 $^{^{30}}$ FO 371/34304: C225 (Makins to Strang, 3 Dec 42), /34306: C8419 (Eden to Oliver, 17 Aug 43); FO 930/181 (Hamilton to Speaight, 25 Feb & OEPEC Rpt, 13 May 42).

with the reduced and fatigued Belgian supervisory force available.31

British diplomatic and military representation became less irritating and confusing through the improved coordination of the Congo British Advisory (COBRA) Committee. Monthly COBRA meetings of British military, financial and shipping experts from Leopoldville and Brazzaville (just across the Congo River) were chaired by the Consul-General in Leopoldville. Resentment towards the Allies also decreased as the American presence in the Congo declined with the departure of U.S. troops after the logistics route from America to the Middle East moved north; this route will be discussed later in this chapter.³²

Anglo-Belgian relations in the Congo during 1943 were also improved by more congenial leaders on both sides. The good influence of British Consul-General Shepherd, mentioned above, was matched by Belgian Minister of State Tschoffen in the autumn of that year. The latter, a former Minister of Colonies, helped during his two-month visit to improve relations between the Belgian government and the colonial administration, which had been soured by the personality conflict between de Vleeschauwer and Ryckmans. Tschoffen's friendly coordination with Shepherd also encouraged the establishment of the Anglo-Belgian Union in Leopoldville. Another hopeful sign of better understanding between the two Allies was Shepherd's role as the British speaker at the Union's first meeting in December 1943.³³

Relations between the two Allies continued to improve during 1944. The resumption of relief parcel service from Portugal to Belgium removed much of the Congo's frustration with the Allied blockade of German-occupied Europe, so attendance rose at Anglo-Belgian Union meetings. Ryckmans' visits to Britain and the United

 $^{^{31}}$ FO 371/38879: C1213 (Shepherd to Eden, 11 Jan 44); FO 425/421: C5502 (Shepherd to Eden, 4 May 43). See Part 4 for more information on the Force Publique.

 $^{^{32}}$ FO 371/34307: C2313 & C15055 (Shepherd to FO, 2 Mar & 18 Nov 43); FO 425/422: C1213 (Shepherd to Eden, 11 Jan 44).

 $^{^{33}}$ FO 371/38879: C487 (Shepherd to Harrison, 29 Dec 43); FO 425/421: C12742 & C15058 (Shepherd to Eden, 15 Oct & 30 Nov 43).

States in early 1944 increased his understanding and appreciation of the total Allied war effort, as well as his standing with the Belgian government. Pro-British feeling grew even more with the successes of the D-Day landings in Normandy and the liberation of Brussels, especially with the prominent involvement of Belgian troops in the latter.³⁴

In spite of improved Allied-Belgian relations from 1941 to 1944, the Congo continued to hold back some of its cooperation and resources from the war effort against the Axis. Both Pierlot and Ryckmans gave precedence to long-term production of goods for Belgium over short-term sacrifice to produce war-essential items for the Allies. A few items, such as coffee and cotton, were already being stockpiled secretly in mid-1943 for use in Belgium after its liberation by the Allies.35 Large pay raises, inflated prices and reluctance to enforce completely price controls or rationing gave the Congo a selfish international image; even Belgian government representatives such as Tschoffen stressed that to the defensive Governor-General. Removal of the Axis-Vichy threat from Africa and continued Allied victories led to even greater complacency about rationing and the need for sacrifice in the Congo. Enthusiasm for war production in the Congo by 1944 was also affected by the fatigue and poor health of Belgians caused by the extended stay in the oppressively hot and humid climate, especially in Leopoldville.36

The Belgian Congo, situated astride the Equator and far from London, had a climate that was difficult to handle in terms of both political and weather conditions. The next part of this chapter will

³⁴ FO 371/38879: C5249 (Shepherd to Eden, 31 Mar 44), /38880: C8547, C9847, C14064 (Shepherd to Eden, 7 Jun, 11 Jul, 2 Oct 44). Chapter IV will discuss relief parcels and the Allied blockade.

 $^{^{35}}$ FO 371/34305: C5502 (Shepherd to Eden, 4 May 43); FO 425/421: C6994 (Eden to Oliphant, 10 Jul 43), /422: C1213 (Shepherd to Eden, 11 Jan 44).

³⁶ A product affected by inflated Belgian prices was palm oil; the Congo asked three times as much as Nigeria. FO 371/34304: C225 (Makins to Strang, 3 Dec 42), FO 425/421: C12742 & C15058 (Shepherd to Eden, 15 Oct & 30 Nov 43). / /422: C9240 & C11484 (ConsGenl to Eden, 29 Jun & 16 Aug 44).

examine the great rewards that made overcoming the challenge of mastering conditions in the Congo worth the effort.

Part 2. Resources and Anglo-American Connections

The Belgian Congo was the biggest resource brought to the Allied war effort by the Belgian exile government. Its vast wealth was also the main source of income for that government, providing the ability to fund fully the Belgian exile war effort and allowing greater influence in London and Washington, D.C. than the small Belgian armed forces justified. Use of resources from the Congo were carefully negotiated between the Belgian producers and the Anglo-American users, with both sides watchful of national interests.

Copper, uranium, gold, zinc, rubber and palm oil were especially valuable resources brought by the Belgian colony to the Allied war effort. The growth of production in the Congo was an impressive accomplishment that should not be overshadowed by the political difficulties discussed above. Analysis of this achievement is vital to understanding the full contribution of the Belgian war effort against the Axis.

emphasised by the despatch of Lord Hailey's economic mission there in August 1940, long before the Pierlot government was established in London. The financial and purchase agreements that resulted from that four-month mission greatly improved the Congo's financial position by April 1941, and the production of tin and industrial diamonds in particular rose significantly during the year. To ease British Empire concerns about long-term competition from production in the Congo, the Churchill government provided wartime subsidies to the colony's products rather than formally admit the Congo as a full member of the sterling bloc. This low-key, temporary approach also precluded demands by other Allies for the same wartime privilege or

by Belgium for postwar preference.37

The first year of British and Belgian interaction concerning the Congo's production revealed the need to be more specific about trading terms. The loss of resources in 1941 and 1942 from Allied colonies in the Far East conquered by Japan made the Congo even more important. The 1941-1942 Congo Purchase Agreement was therefore more detailed, committing the British to buy 144,000 long tons of copper and all available tin and palm kernels at prices comparable to Empire sources. Copal and cotton were other products of the Congo on Britain's top priority list. As much as possible, the British would use Belgian ships for trade with the Congo, while the Belgians would operate an import and export licensing system in line with policy and practice in British colonies in Africa.³⁸

The variety and size of requirements for products from the Congo increased for the 1942-1943 period, as shown by British orders (in thousands of tons) for copper (226), copal gum (11) and rubber (5). Concurrent American orders (in thousands of tons) were zinc ore (38.5), tin (31.4) and manganese (12.5). The Americans and British were the Congo's best customers by far in 1942, and increased their orders in 1943 to continue absorbing approximately 70 percent of the colony's exports.³⁹

Production and export of raw materials from the Congo was generally smooth and near maximum capability by 1944 and 1945.

Impressive increases in production were made in wild rubber, palm oil, tin and textiles. Some minor problems did occur, such as a lack of rain during the winter of 1943-1944 which caused temporary food

³⁷ Van Langenhove, *Garants*, 112; FO 432/7: 42 (Joint to Eden, 21 Jul 41); FO 317/26251: C2285 (DO to UK HC to SA, 21 Feb 41). Rises in production from 1939 to 1941 were: tin, 2 to 17 thousand tons; industrial diamonds, 8 to over 12 million carats. Ford, *Belgian Africa*, 13.

 $^{^{38}}$ CAB 111/312 (Lincoln to Jenner, 18 Feb 42; Anglo-Belgian Agreement, 4 Jun 42).

 $^{^{39}}$ CAB 111/313 (Gray to Harrison, 18 Dec 42). S. Africa was the Congo's third largest customer (about 15% of exports). CAB 110/167 (CAB, 14 Apr 44).

shortages and decreased copper mining.⁴⁰ Insufficient machinery or tools sometimes slowed production, as did a threatened labour strike of Europeans in February 1944.⁴¹ Companies grumbled about rationing and the rising price of imports, but they also insisted on getting the highest available price for their own products.⁴²

Competition from other producers kept the prices attainable for products from the Congo within reasonable limits. For example, the Congo provided Britain with only five to seven percent of its copper and cotton imports from 1941 to 1944; the United States and Empire sources provided most of Britain's needs in both categories. 43 The loss of resources in the Far East to Japan had caused new sources of tin, rubber, copper, fibres, and palm oil to be developed in British and French African colonies as well as the Congo. Those products, such as copal resin or boart (the lowest grade of industrial diamond), for which the Congo was the predominant or sole source only had limited available wartime customers, so prices on these items were also kept within reasonable limits by a "closed market" which had boundaries defined by purchase agreements and sanctions against unauthorised trade. Inflated prices based on high demand were avoided by controlled and coordinated purchasing of raw materials by the United States and Britain through the Combined Board system (see below).44

Cultural and organisational differences between the British and Belgian systems made it difficult to blend completely the two bureaucracies involved in the trade and production of the Congo.

British specialists were technical experts who could request specific

 $^{^{40}}$ News 5 (1945): 8; FO 371/38879: C5249 (Shepherd to Eden, 31 Mar 44).

⁴¹ ABTJ 30 (1943): 61; News 5 (1945): 8.

⁴² FO 371/48985: Z3401 (Ledger to Eden, 1 Mar 45).

 $^{^{43}}$ AVIA 22/3101: 3A (1 May 41), /3102: 44 (19 Aug 41), /3103: 25 (10 Sep 42), /3106 (9 Jun 44).

 $^{^{44}}$ J. Hurstfield, The Control of Raw Materials (London: HMSO, 1953), 166, 293; CAB 115/731 (FO to ConsGenl, 25 Jul 43); PRO, Min. of Supply (SUPP) 14/688: 8B (Shackle (BT), 9 Apr 41).

production, but did not have the authority to provide capital goods to support it. Belgian generalists had authority to negotiate in several areas, but did not have the expertise to provide specific details for items needed. Higher prices offered by the Americans for products also needed by the British made the Allied demand for equal priority for both irritating to companies in the Congo. The Belgian government was also concerned that unchecked competition would inflate Congo prices so much that postwar drops in production value would harm economic and political stability in the relatively pampered colony. However, big business dominated the Congo to such an extent that big profits and substantial consumer imports were made in spite of efforts by the Belgian government and the Allied Combined Boards. Colonial governments in the French and British colonies had more power over private companies, and so were able to control their economies more effectively.⁴⁵

The Congo was able to reap large profits because the large variety and quantity of raw materials it produced were needed quickly by the Allies, especially Britain. Checks on the greed of large companies in the Congo were provided by the governmental pressure mentioned above, as well as the position of the United States with respect to the colony as an optional customer and primary supplier for many products. He may be companies outside of the Congo also took advantage of their position as a critical supplier. The Diamond Trading Company (DTC) in London, a subsidiary of De Beers of South Africa, controlled 90 percent of the world's diamond marketing during the Second World War. DTC used its near-monopoly to raise diamond prices 40 percent above the prewar level, and conspired with the

 $^{^{45}}$ CAB 111/312 (Makins to Hasler, 12 Mar 42; Lincoln to Makins, 20 Mar 42), /313 (Rea Price to Roberts, 5 Sep 42; Logie to Fraser, 28 Oct 42).

⁴⁶ When the U.S. felt prices for raw materials from the Congo were too high, it could afford to refuse them. Examples of items critical to the British being rejected sometimes by Americans include industrial diamonds and copal. SUPP 14/688: 50B (Van Moppes to Shackle, 31 May 41); AVIA 22/3191: 42 (FO to ConsGenl, 12 Mar 44).

government of South Africa to ensure that diamonds from that country were available at prices 10 percent below other African producers.⁴⁷

Differences in methods of negotiation, product priorities, and prices offered for production by Britain and the United States to producers worldwide led to the creation of the Anglo-American Combined Boards organisation in Washington, D.C. Combined Boards set up in 1942 included Raw Materials, Resources and Shipping Boards in Washington, D.C. and subordinate committees elsewhere. The Allied African Economics Committee, created in London in early 1943, coordinated economic matters between the Anglo-American allies and the Franco-Belgian colonies in an Africa free of Axis forces. Tripartite Committee in Leopoldville coordinated production and import requirements for the Congo among Belgian, British and American representatives. Further integration of the supply and production activities of the three governments was deemed in early 1944 to be unnecessary due to adequate functioning of the two committees mentioned above. Conflicts between British and American priorities could still arise in spite of Allied coordination and the Combined Board structure, however. For example, in 1944 the United States attempted to get the Congo to move labour from copal to rubber harvesting in spite of British protests. The latter insisted that workers needed to stay in the copal industry to meet urgent Empire requirements from its sole source of the distinctive resin. 48

The last, and perhaps most important, purchase agreement on products from the Congo concerned uranium and thorium. Belgium agreed to deliver 3,440,000 pounds of uranium oxide to the Combined Development Trust as the agent for the governments of the United States and Britain, and then give the latter the option of first refusal for a period of ten years after the contract for military and

 $^{^{47}}$ SUPP 14/688: 1B (Board of Trade, 23 Mar 41). South African diamonds were therefore more likely to be sold in optional or jewelry sales, as well as get immediate postwar civilian clients.

 $^{^{48}}$ CAB 115/731 (FO to ConsGenl, 25 Jul 43), /732 (Harrison to Fraser, 1 Jan 44 and FO to ConsGenl, 7 Feb 44); AVIA 22/3191: 42 (FO to BritEmbUS, 27 Mar 44).

strategic purposes. Commercial use of the ores for energy production would be done only by agreement among the three governments. The guiding principle for activities under the agreement was to be "effective control for the protection of civilisation."

Strong military and commercial ties between the Americans and the Belgians developed during the four years before the uraniumthorium agreement. Belgium emphasised productive relations with the United States early in the war, sending top officials to New York before the Pierlot government had reassembled in London. Former Prime Minister Georges Theunis was designated an ambassador plenipotentiary to handle national economic and financial matters, as well as keeping Ambassador Cartier and other Belgian officials in London informed of American trends and intentions. Camille Gutt, the best English-speaker in the Pierlot cabinet, went to Canada and the United States for five weeks in mid-1941 on military and financial business respectively. Among the public relations successes during his visit was donating the "Belgian Friendship Building" to Virginia Union University and going to the White House. His meeting with President Franklin Roosevelt went very well, as the latter noted with pride that his ancestors came from Ghent in Flanders. 50

The Belgian colony in the United States was quite small (65,000) compared to other Allied exile nationalities, such as the Poles (1.3 million). Not having a large expatriate group with natural sympathy for their cause, Belgian government agencies had to work hard to maintain American compassion for the cause of Belgium. The Belgian Government Information Center (BGIC) in New York published several wartime English-language pamphlets, including The

⁴⁹ U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1944 (Wash. D.C.: USGPO, 1967), 2: 1029-30. It seems that civilisation was to be protected against active enemies (Germany and Japan) as well as possible future ones (USSR). Of the other Allied uranium producers, Canada, but not the USSR, was consulted. FO 371/38880: C7764 (UK-US-Belgian notes, 7 Jun 44).

 $^{^{50}}$ The donated "Belgian Friendship Building" was the former Belgian pavilion at the 1939-40 World's Fair at NY. BI, 24 Apr, 5 Jun 41; Boelaerts, "Archives," 58-9.

President Knows, Belgian Humor under the German Heel, Belgium's Fighting Forces and The Liberation of Belgium. The Belgians were quite visible in New York, as shown by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia's enthusiastic broadcast in 1942 praising his bold counterpart in Brussels, Burgomaster François van de Meulebroeck. Based on the words of both mayors, the "Code for a Mayor" was later published by the BGIC. The President of the Belgian Chamber of Deputies and former mayor of Antwerp, Frans Van Cauwelaert, was invited to New York in 1944 to help open a new session of the Municipal Council.51

Belgian public relations in the United States paid off when Belgium became the first of the small Allies to sign an agreement under the Lend-Lease Act on 16 June 1942. Belgium received the same terms of service and reciprocal aid as Britain, China and the Soviet Union. Article 7 pleased the Belgians in particular, because it contained proposals to improve trade by reducing customs barriers between the two countries.⁵²

Most Allied lend-lease supplies, including those for Belgium, were handled by the British under policies established by the Allied Supply Executive in London and the Combined Boards in Washington, D.C. The British and Americans completely dominated these bodies; the small Allies were consulted only when necessary concerning shipping and raw materials. Belgian military requirements usually entered the Combined Board administrative channels through the appropriate British military ministry and the Joint War Production Staff, while civilian needs were handled by licensed companies or an agency such as the Ministry of Supply. All lend-lease orders from Allied governments in London were funnelled through the Empire and Allied Requirements Division of the British Supply Council, which

⁵¹ Another agency in London, the Belgian Information Office, also published pamphlets, such as *Thirty Questions about Belgium* and *Belgium's War Effort. BI*, 17 Apr 41, 18 Jun, 3 Dec 42, 24 Feb 44.

⁵² CREH, 4LD (MFA B/2313, 14 Jul 42).

gave precedence to the needs of British dominions.53

It is little wonder that the Belgians tried to circumvent the cumbersome and biased Anglo-American supply bureaucracy by using their well-financed independent purchasing commission in New York to get civilian items for the Congo. Anglo-American displeasure at the success of the aggressive Belgian commission and loose control of export licenses to the Congo was matched by Belgian dissatisfaction with lengthy delays in shipping arms and military equipment to the Congo's Force Publique. Belgian protests directly to the U.S. State Department in March 1942 and procrastination on signing a reciprocal lend-lease agreement led quickly to a temporary increase in deliveries of allocated arms to the Congo.⁵⁴

Governor-General Ryckmans presented a Congo viewpoint that was popular locally but unacceptable elsewhere, when he told Belgian government emissary Tschoffen that the Congo had sacrificed productive peacetime activities for the sake of the Allied war effort, and therefore deserved all the benefits it was getting. Leaders in the Congo justified using precious shipping space for consumer items such as plastic necklaces, flowered cotton print cloth and sewing machines as being necessary to motivate native workers who wanted to use their increased wages for goods rather than for savings accounts. Tschoffen pointed out that the standard of living in the Congo was among the highest in the world, and that the huge profits being made in the colony had been noted unfavourably in London. 55

Anglo-American representatives in the Congo were unhappy that wage and rationing controls were so loose that product prices and consumption were rising with little regard to Allied costs and resource priorities. Even though it was often ineffective in meeting

⁵³ PREM 3/44: 51 (Churchill to Roosevelt, 23 Jan 42), 56-8 (Churchill to Parliament, Jan 1942), 167-73 (CAB W.P.(41) 302, 19 Dec 41); J.D. Scott and Richard Hughes, The Administration of War Production (UKCS) (London: HMSO, 1955), 351, 441.

⁵⁴ AVIA 38/1219: 1, 17-9, 23, 28-33, 198.

 $^{^{55}}$ FO 425/421: C12742 & C15058 (Shepherd to Eden, 7 Apr, 15 Oct & 30 Nov 43), Ford, Belgian Africa, 15.

Allied guidelines, the supply bureau was still unpopular with local Belgians due to its government-imposed rules on restricting import licenses. Allied supply experts were overworked and usually far away from Leopoldville. The best that they were able to do was trim inflated goods and equipment lists for the Congo and make the supply system more efficient by refining vague Belgian requests with more precise data. 56

The Belgian Congo deserved much of the outside criticism for excess profits and an inflated life style from 1941 to 1945.

However, its American accusers in their prosperous sanctuary were a little hypocritical in casting blame on a colony whose criticised level of consumption was being sustained at great profit by American business. In addition, many individuals in Britain and the United States sought to make their own war profits by selling items in the black market, or even looting homes or shops that had been bombed. 57 It seemed that greed influenced some people on both sides of the dispute among government agencies and businesses in London, Leopoldville and Washington, D.C.

Great transoceanic distances between the three cities above also influenced the different viewpoints of their inhabitants. A review of the transportation links between the Congo, its neighbours, and the Anglo-American homelands is necessary to understand better the difficulties of trying to maintain and control trade with a large and distant colony during wartime.

Part 3. Logistics and Ships

Secure lines of communication were vital to the Belgian Congo during the Second World War. It was fortunate for the isolated colony that the U-boat threat in the South Atlantic was lower than in

 $^{^{56}}$ FO 425/421: C4296, C12742; FO 371/30771: C4861 (Harrison (FO), 9 May 42).

⁵⁷ CAB 111/312 (Hope Gill to FO, 26 Feb 42); Mack, London, 52, 139. One postwar study noted that one of every 15 American businesses was charged with illegal transactions. Richard Lingeman, Don't You Know There's a War On? (NY: Putnam, 1970), 279-80.

the North Atlantic, so that most of the ships (often Belgian) carrying passengers and goods to or from the Congo reached their destination. The Belgian merchant marine usually sailed in the North and South Atlantic, and will be analysed in this chapter because of its key role in the Congo trade.

Most people and supplies came to the ports of Matadi or Boma by ship, then went by rail to Leopoldville or by river barge to one of several distribution points located along the Congo River or a tributary. Road connections from towns in the Congo were poor to most destinations inside and outside the colony, so large movements of people or supplies were usually slow and done by river transport.

Allied transportation and engineering projects expanded the road, river and airfield capability during 1942 and 1943 when the Congo was used as a logistics link between the Americas and the Middle East. These benefitted colonial transportation systems as well, including the air route system managed by the Belgian national airline, SABENA. New links to the Middle East and other African destinations, primarily British colonies and South Africa, were also available later in the war.

During 1942, the Congo became an important logistics route as well as a destination. Its strategic importance as a transition channel had been apparent to the South Africans even earlier; in late 1940, they had requested permission to send a military mission into the eastern Congo to survey a route for troops and supplies to get to Kenya. Although a major land route connecting the Congo with its important southern neighbour did not develop, SABENA did create an air route connecting Leopoldville and Cape Town in January 1942. Wartime necessity prompted quick growth of the company's operations, so that by 1942 SABENA's tonnage and miles flown was approximately ten times the 1939 figures. 58

Wartime necessity also led to the establishment by the

 $^{^{58}}$ Boelaerts, "Archives," 277; News 2 (1942): 72; BI, 11 Jun 42 & 2 Dec 43.

Americans in 1942 of the Congo-Middle East line of communication for supplies and aircraft from North America to Egypt and India. This route was a longer, but safer, logistics link from the United States to Cairo than risking German attacks on the North Atlantic and Mediterranean, or risking internment in Vichy-controlled French West Africa. After five months of consultation, coordination and communication, a multinational inland transport committee was created in December 1942 to manage a Congo-to-Nile river, rail and road transport system that was already moving 5,000 tons a month. An Anglo-American aircraft ferry service was operating at the same time from Matadi or Pointe Noire (French Congo) to Mombasa (Kenya) via Elisabethville. After the final defeat of Axis forces in Tunisia in May 1943, supply tonnage along the Congo-Nile route decreased greatly because the logistics route to the Mediterranean Sea was moved north. By July 1943, American troop strength in the camp near Leopoldville had a similar drop after the decline of the aircraft ferry route. In May 1944, the Congo-Nile land line of communication closed completely after mastery of the Mediterranean Sea and North Atlantic Ocean was won by the Allies.59

The Belgian merchant marine was heavily involved in Allied as maritime trade with the Congo, as well the logistics efforts in the North Atlantic and Allied landings in North Africa and Europe. All Belgian merchant ships were ordered into government wartime service in a series of orders between 17 May and 25 June 1940. 63 of the ships escaped to British-controlled ports during this period, and 25 more were interned by the British due to the uncertain attitude of the isolated Belgian government in Vichy France. The remaining dozen Belgian ships were interned in ports controlled by the Axis or

⁵⁹ AVIA 38/1219: 31; FO 123/570: 1406 (Bentinck to Davidson, 4 Apr; Roberts to Oliphant, 6 Nov; Spaak to Oliphant, 4 Dec; Harrison to Oliphant, 31 Dec 42); FO 425/421: C1873 (Shepherd to Eden, 30 Jan 43). Mombasa, the major hub for sea and air transport on Kenya's coast, was an important transit point to the China-Burma-India theatre in 1942-44.

Pétain's government.60

Due to the uncertain status of the Belgian government between June and October 1940, the early involvement of Belgian seamen in Royal Navy (RN) activities was limited to individuals on RN Patrol Service boats with a predominately British crew, usually on Britain's west coast. However, wartime necessity and pro-Allied actions by Cartier, Gutt and de Vleeschauwer soon resulted in a July 1940 agreement with the British Ministry of Shipping. This brought Belgian merchant ships manned by their own crews into the British-led Allied maritime logistics effort. Nine Belgian cross-Channel steamers were also chartered in a supplement to the original agreement. The importance of the Belgians' resource-rich colony led to six Belgian ships being reserved for each of the trade routes connecting the Congo with Britain and the United States. The small Belgian merchant fleet formed five percent of the foreign fleet under British contract during most of the war, but was only one percent of the total British (including the Dominions), Allied and neutral tonnage under British control from 1940 to 1945.61

Several hundred ships from other Allied and neutral nations were also under agreements made between October 1939 and November 1940. War and marine risk insurance for all contracted ships and boats was paid by the Ministry of Shipping (renamed War Transport in May 1941). Operating cost efficiency favoured larger ships, so smaller Allied ships were avoided in Ministry of War Transport contracts if possible.⁶²

The Belgians pressured the British for a year to get better

 $^{^{60}}$ CREH, 4 LD (MFA to Consuls, 17 Feb 42); FO 123/568: 88 (Admiralty, ca. 1941 & INBEL, 24 Feb 42); ADM 199/779: M13050 (Dickens, July 1940).

⁶¹ ADM 199/779: M13050 (Lang, 18 Jul 40); PRO, Ministry of Shipping/War Transport (MT) 59/1747 (Shipping Agreement, 20 Jul; Agreement Supplement, 20 Sep 40); C.B.A. Behrens, *Merchant Shipping and the Demands of War* (London: HMSO, 1955), 69, 114-8, 293, 451.

 $^{^{62}}$ MT 59/1747 (Agreements report, 17 Mar 41). Britain used ships by agreement with (thousands of tons) Norway (2600), Greece (1500), Netherlands (1470), Sweden (485), Belgium (247), and others (144).

rates than the ones the inexperienced Belgian economic mission had negotiated in haste in July 1940. Pierlot's negotiators in 1941 and 1942 had full government backing and shipping expertise, which the 1940 Belgian mission had lacked. A revised Anglo-Belgian agreement was finally signed on 26 March 1942 to raise Belgian contract rates closer to those of the larger Allied merchant fleets, as well as provide fair compensation for non-productive time in port waiting for installation of defensive equipment. Options were included for the needs of the Congo and Belgium after liberation, but the ships were to remain in the Allied transport pool for the duration of the war.⁶³

31 Belgian merchant ships were sunk during 1940 and 1941, giving it the highest loss rate (36%) among the Allied fleets. 17 more ships were lost during 1942 and 1943, but new replacements during 1942-1944 kept the total number of Belgian merchant vessels chartered to the British between 42 and 48. Larger ship replacements included eleven freighters from the British in 1942 and 1943, and two American Liberty ships in 1944. The great majority of the Belgian ships were smaller freighters, but there were some of the larger deep-water types. A dozen tankers and passenger liners were also available; the latter were turned into troopships. 64

Most Belgian merchant ships spent the majority of their time sailing the dangerous convoy routes across the North Atlantic. Enroute time varied according to the speed of the convoy and the season of the year; the best combination was fast ships (9 knots) in the summer, which took 17 days for a round-trip between Newfoundland and Britain. Smaller convoys of 30 to 35 ships predominated during

⁶³ Early Belgian monthly rates per dead-weight ton were less than half that of Norwegian ships, and the new rates were still nearly a third lower. The small Belgian fleet was not irreplaceable for the British, and lacked attractive items such as large (8000 tons) or fast (10 knots) freighters, or tankers. MT 59/1730 (Anderson to Stephens, 5 Feb 41; Anglo-Belgian Agreement, 26 Mar 42).

⁶⁴ MT 65/100 (MT Reports, 31 Oct 40/41/42/43, 30 Apr 44); ABTJ 32 (1945): 46; Paul Scarceriaux, "Synthèse de la participation de la flotte marchande belge auxévènements de 1939-1945," L'Armée-La Nation (LALN) 6, no. 11 (1951): 15-18.

the winter, when worse weather made it more difficult to keep larger convoys of over 50 ships together. It was also harder for the German U-boats to find and attack ships in foggy weather and choppy seas, which provided better odds of survival for the cold, scared and seasick merchant seamen in slow convoys (7 knots) taking up to 27 days for a round-trip on the wintry North Atlantic. Destroyers or corvettes usually provided convoy escort in a ratio of one warship to each five to ten freighters, and were able to keep losses down to approximately three percent. The highest losses were from August 1942 to May 1943, at which point Allied shipbuilding, escort strength and technology finally overwhelmed the U-boat "wolfpacks." 65

It was during this peak of the U-boat threat that the luck of the Belgian ship Moanda finally ran out. After surviving five previous attacks by aircraft and submarines, the freighter was shattered by a torpedo on 28 March 1943 near Greenland. Rough seas hid them from potential escort ship rescuers, so the survivors drifted for ten days before a friendly aircraft spotted them. The 15 survivors were fortunate that they drifted southeast toward friendly forces and better weather, but three men had died while awaiting rescue. Life at sea was hard, with sea duty reaching 20-25 days a month during 1941 and 1942. Enemy attacks also made being a seaman a tough job, as shown by the eventual total of Belgian losses during the Second World War: 885 seamen and 77 ships. 66

Belgian ships also kept busy on routes to and from the Congo, provided logistics and passenger support for Allied amphibious landings in the Mediterranean and Normandy, and even supported the British fleet in the Pacific in 1945. The Jean Jadot was the first

⁶⁵ The chances of convoyed ships being torpedoed rose to a peak of 3-4% in 1942-3. ADM 199/599: TD 104/43 (Lloyd, 5 Sep 43 & Holme, 9 Sep 43); Churchill, War, 676.

⁶⁶ Ship losses were 57% of the combined Belgian prewar fleet and wartime additions of freighters and tankers. Belgian crew losses were over 25% of the 1940-45 total. British losses were lower percentages, but much larger in scale (over 2,300 ships and nearly 32,000 men). Marine (London) 3, no. 7 (1943): 3-5; Scarceriaux, "Synthèse," 15; John Slader, The Fourth Service: Merchantmen at War 1939-1945 (London: Robert Hale, 1994), 17, 276, 294, 320.

Allied ship into Algiers harbour in November 1942 after the successful Allied landings in North Africa; unfortunately, she was sunk soon afterwards. On the other hand, one of her Belgian maritime sisters was sunk intentionally as part of the breakwater for the Allied artificial harbour at Arromanches that supported operations in Normandy during 1944.⁶⁷

A half-dozen Belgian cross-Channel packets converted to RN fleet auxiliaries were used in combined operations landings to carry hundreds of soldiers; some of these ships helped to evacuate Allied troops from St. Malo in June 1940 and Dieppe in August 1942, as well as supporting larger landings in 1943 and 1944.68 Remembered very fondly by her passengers was the René Paul, a packet that carried over 2,400 Allied refugees from Lisbon to Gibraltar between 1941 and 1944. Perhaps the best-known Belgian troop transports were the three large passenger liners that had connected the Congo with Belgium. The Elisabethville and Thysville each carried a total of over 77,000 men during the war, while the larger Léopoldville transported about 124,000. Unfortunately, the latter was torpedoed off Cherbourg on 24 December 1944, and took over 800 American soldiers and Belgian crew with her when she sank.69

The Belgian government tried to make life ashore for its sailors a little easier by establishing seamen's clubs and homes that members of merchant crews could use for lodging, meals and relaxation during their typical 13-day layovers in Britain. Many contained libraries and lecture rooms, and had a Red Cross clinic or dispensary attached. A large home, such as the one in Liverpool, could sleep

⁶⁷ Scarceriaux, "Synthèse," 17-8; News 5 (1945): 152.

⁶⁸ The fleet auxiliaries, all named after Belgian royalty, could only be used in shallow seas or fair weather because of their light construction and limited range. PRO, Defence (DEFE) 2/837 (Engineerin-Chief to Director of Combined Operations, 2 Oct 40; ADM to Ships' Captains, 1 Jan 41); Slader, Fourth Service, 27, 223, 237-8, 271; Paul Scarceriaux, "Comment de Miranda, on passait en Angleterre sur un navire belge...," LALN 3, no. 11 (1948): 23-26.

⁶⁹ Paul Scarceriaux, "La fin du H.M.T. Léopoldville," *LALN* 8, no. 12 (1953): 13; Scarceriaux, "Synthèse," 17-8.

80. Equivalent establishments were placed in Glasgow, Swansea and Cardiff; all were open to Belgian fishermen, as well as other Allied seamen on a limited basis. A London rest home was established in early 1943, sorely needed to help Belgian casualties recuperate from enemy attacks. These clubs and homes were important to the morale of men working in isolated and dangerous circumstances.⁷⁰

For those seamen on Belgian ships linking the Congo with its trading partners, the small port of Matadi on the Congo River was a welcome sight. Ports could also be negative influences on morale if they showed seamen that their sacrifices were not adequately appreciated. Examples of such occasions included when many Glasgow dockworkers were rude and lazy in dealing with the crews and cargo, and when Belgian seamen compared their poor pay with that of other Allies (especially Americans).71

Another way that the Belgian government tried to raise seamen's morale was by the creation of the Maritime Medal on 13 August 1943. All sailors on Belgian ships were eligible; medals were liberally awarded for bravery, death from enemy action, or surviving multiple sinkings. The awarding of 1600 Maritime Medals from 1943 to 1944 to sailors on merchant, fishing and RN Section Belge vessels was one indicator of the many dangers still faced at sea in spite of Allied ascendancy over the Germans. New crew members continued to fill gaps left by dead or disabled seamen. Second mate recruits were trained at the University College of Southampton, while new radio-telegraph operators were sent through a six-month course at the Belgian Maritime Radio School in London.

Also located in London was the Belgian Maritime Court, opened on 10 February 1942 to consider legal charges against Belgian

 $^{^{70}}$ Marine 3, no. 4 (1943): 20-1; ADM 199/599 (Lloyd, 5 Sep 43); BI, 6 Nov 41, 9 Apr 42, 28 Dec 44.

 $^{^{71}}$ PREM 3/43: 4 (Security Control Officer (Glasgow), 27 Apr 42). Monthly seaman salaries: U.S.= £25, U.K.= £14, Belgian= £12%. CREH, LK 8 (De Witte, 15 Feb 43).

⁷² BI, 3 Jul 41, 7 Oct 43; Marine 4, nos. 1 (1944): 9 and 7: 5.

citizens for acts committed on Belgian ships. Under the Belgian arrangement, the primary court had three judges, and so did the appeals court. Allied seamen preferred to face their own national courts instead of British ones, since the former understood the defendant's culture and language; the Belgian courts offered proceedings in French or Flemish. Allied governments liked the courts as another symbol of their sovereignty over their ships and citizens.⁷³

The Belgian Congo was practically as dependent on ships for its well-being as Britain. Almost all materiel imported and produce exported came by ship, as did most people. The heavy involvement of the Belgian merchant marine in this commerce was natural for personal as well as political reasons, as there were Congolese seamen on board the freighters that sailed to and from Matadi. This port was the Congo's equivalent of Liverpool in Britain, and its unique importance prompted concerns about its defence. These concerns will be analysed next in Part 4.

Part 4. Forces from the South

The Belgian government was concerned about the military position of the Congo for reasons of defence and prestige. The huge colony was poorly defended, and seemed to be a logical place for German raiders to strike. The Congo's distance from the North Atlantic and Mediterranean was a blessing in that it did not become a battlefield, but it was a curse for the Force Publique in the sense that rearmament of their troops and defences remained a low Anglo-American priority. Military glory sought by the Belgian leadership seemed to come with victory over weak opponents in Abyssinia, but it faded later due to the Force Publique being denied combat operations against the Germans or Japanese. The training of many Belgians from the Congo in South Africa for air force duties in the RAF or South African Air Force (SAAF) diverted potential officers from the Force

 $^{^{73}}$ FO 371/32226: W1285 (de Baer to Ward, 22 Jan 42), /32227: W8758 (Ward (FO), 26 Jun 42); BI, 19 Feb 42.

Publique, making big improvements in its potential or efficiency more difficult. The frustrations of trying to get the armaments, respect and glory that the leaders in the Congo thought they deserved affected the mood of Belgians in London and Leopoldville alike. Understanding the military aspirations and limitations of the Congo is an important part of any complete analysis dealing with its role in Belgium's war effort from 1940 to 1945.

Minister of Colonies de Vleeschauwer and his associates in Leopoldville were concerned about a possible German naval raid on the undefended mouth of the Congo River. The small port of Boma and the larger rail and water terminus of Matadi lay 70 and 100 miles upriver respectively, and were also undefended. Comparable in geography and regional importance for the Congo basin to Belgium's relationship to Antwerp and the Scheldt River, it is easy to understand why the Belgians in 1940 wanted six-inch naval guns, motor torpedo boats or trawlers, aircraft and anti-aircraft artillery to counter a possible Axis threat to Matadi and the Congo River. A British government committee in early 1941 felt that defending this area was a valid concern, but not a high enough priority to take six-inch guns away from somewhere else.74

However, persistent but low key Belgian pressure, reinforced by a sympathetic Foreign Office, at last convinced the Admiralty in early 1942 to release four Belgian trawlers for conversion to minesweepers to patrol the Congo River. These trawlers were approved for political rather than military reasons. Less than ten ships a month called at Matadi, and the nearest U-boat "hunting grounds" were approximately 2,000 miles away near Freetown, Sierra Leone and Cape Town, South Africa. The decline of the overall U-boat threat by mid-1943, combined with lack of Belgian naval manpower and lack of motor horsepower to handle substantial Congo River currents led to mutual cancellation of the trawler patrol by the Admiralty and the Belgian

 $^{^{74}}$ WO 106/2892: 14 (HQ W.Africa Forces meeting of 5-6 Aug, 10 Aug 41).

government.75

The other possible military threat that worried leaders in the Congo from 1940 to 1942 was an attack by Italian or German forces on their northeast province (Stanleyville). The commander of the 3rd Group there, Lt Col Mauroy, showed the first serious signs of Force Publique restlessness when he went to the Sudan without authorisation in July 1940 to discuss joint defence policy with the local British commanding general. Neither the Foreign Office nor the Governor-General wanted the Force Publique fighting Italians outside the Congo in 1940, since Belgium was not yet at war with Italy. Lt Col Mauroy was finally dismissed when he overstepped acceptable rules of conduct in late 1940 by giving Ryckmans an ultimatum to send troops in support of the British campaign against the Italians.⁷⁶

Popular pressure in the colony for combat action against the Axis aggressors was eased with the proclamation of a state of war between Italy and Belgium a few weeks later on 27 November. This allowed official negotiations for Belgian colonial troops to enter the war outside the Congo. The British felt that lack of training and equipment in the Force Publique made their troops more useful for internal security in the colony than for offensive operations. A compromise was soon reached that authorised one battalion to move to neighbouring Sudan for garrison duty. 77

British concerns for the combat effectiveness of the Force
Publique in 1940 were well founded. 40,000 troops were dispersed in
three groups with headquarters averaging over 800 miles distance from
each other. Almost all travel within the Congo had to be by
riverboat or aircraft, making logistics, communications and troop

 $^{^{75}}$ ADM 1/12894: SFO 7806 (Committee for the Coordination of Allied Supplies, 30 Jan 41); OD 1049 (Davis (ADM), 22 & 28 Mar; Bain (ADM), 31 Mar 42); M1512 (King (PNLO), 24 May 43).

 $^{^{76}}$ FO 371/24282: C7230 (FO-CinC Middle East, 17 Jun & 24 Jul 40), C12078 (19 Military Mission (MM) to WO, 20 Nov 40). The city of Stanleyville was renamed Kisangani in the 1970s.

 $^{^{77}}$ FO 371/24282: C11016 (FO to Joint, 7 Nov 40), C13119 (CinC Middle East to WO, 6 & 19 Dec 40); Charles, Forces, 82-3.

movements limited and slow. Designed for local or frontier security, the groups lacked field artillery, aircraft or anti-tank/aircraft guns. The movement of one Force Publique battalion into the Sudan and a second brigade into the northeast Congo within four months of official hostilities with Italy were major logistics successes, considering the units' static origins and marginal lines of communication .⁷⁸

The 250,000 Italian and native troops in Abyssinia greatly outnumbered the 10,000 British colonial forces in Kenya and Sudan. Belgian desires for active campaign operations therefore found support among local British commanders, and in early March 1941 the Force Publique's XI Battalion joined the King's African Rifles to win the battles of Asosa and Gambela between 10 and 22 March. This success prompted the despatch of two more battalions from the 3rd Brigade to form a regimental expeditionary force that also contained two light artillery batteries and an engineer company. 79

Further advances into southwest Abyssinia were delayed by torrential summer rains that isolated most of the Force Publique troops for several weeks and led to widespread disease. The end of the rain allowed the Belgian colonial force to finish its advance through mountainous terrain and outmanoeuvre an Italian force three times its size. The surrender of Saio on 3 July 1941 ended Italian resistance in the entire Galla Sidamo region, and resulted in nine enemy generals and nearly 7,500 troops becoming prisoners. The victory at Saio, combined with the British defeat of a larger Italian force at Amba Alagi in May, ended Italian advances in East Africa. It was the high point of military glory for the Force Publique in the Second World War, and the Congo was very proud of its colonial troops

⁷⁸ Realignment and enlargement of the three groups (created for regional security) prompted their redesignation to brigades (with military mobility in mind). Each Congo brigade had 6,000 infantrymen and 4,000 porters. WO 106/2896: 3 & 5 (19 MM to WO, 14 Sep 40 & 5 Mar 41); Charles, Forces, 82-3.

 $^{^{79}}$ Jacques Lacomblez, "Une victoire qui fut d'une importance capitale," <code>LALN 1, no. 2 (1946): 14; E. van der Meersch, "La Force Publique en 1939-1945," LALN 12, no. 6 (1957): 13.</code>

when they returned home between September and December 1941.80

A War Office pamphlet on the campaign in Ethiopia was published in late 1942, but it barely mentioned the Belgian forces involved. This oversight caused such anger among Belgians in London and the Congo that a more acceptable version had to be published within a few months. Perhaps the achievement of winning a campaign that involved harsh terrain, long distances and inadequate medical care was overshadowed by the perception that it was an easy victory. One campaign summary paraphrased Churchill by stating, "Surely never in the field of human conflict have so many run away so fast and so far from so few." The pamphlet incident was an interesting example of the different British and Belgian perspectives: the proud Belgians had only one small victory to cherish, while the British had fought for a longer time, beaten larger Italian forces, and had been able to change their centre of attention to bigger matters, such as the victory at El Alamein in October-November 1942.

Meanwhile, Anglo-Belgian discussions on a possible additional role for the Force Publique in the defence of Africa had been taking place in western Africa and London. Insistence by the wary Belgians on thorough consideration of long-term Anglo-Franco-Belgian political matters and on making all final agreements in London delayed the movement of troops from the Congo to Nigeria for several months. Local military commanders agreed on a joint course of action in August 1941 at a conference in Accra (Gold Coast), but Spaak was concerned about possible reprisals from Vichy on Belgian exiles in unoccupied France if their French colonial troops were to fight against the Force Publique. Furthermore, de Vleeschauwer did not

⁸⁰ P. Ermens, "Les Problèmes du commandement au cours de la campagne d'Abyssinie," LALN 12, no. 6 (1957): 15, 18; Lacomblez, "Victoire," 15; Charles, Forces, 85-6. Anglo-Indian forces defeated the last isolated Italians in Abyssinia on 27 Nov 41. Mercer, Chronicle, 187, 244.

⁸¹ FO 371/30803: C9297 (Harrison to Carlisle, 3 Oct 42), C11676 (Delfosse to Coote, 21 Nov 42); R. Barnsley, "The Medical Services and Experiences of the Abyssinian Campaign 1940-1941," Inter-Allied Conferences of War Medicine 1942-1947 (London: Staples, 1947), 279-81. Abyssinia was known as Ethiopia after the Second World War.

want to grant military leaders in the Congo more than the absolute minimum of independent action. Progress was made after Sir Lancelot Oliphant returned as the British ambassador to the Belgian government in December, and gave his personal assurance that Belgian colonial troops would not be committed to battle without Belgian government approval. A brigade of the Force Publique was then authorised to move to Nigeria for training and eventual active operations, and the stumbling blocks concerning arms shipments to the Congo and Belgian jurisdiction over troops in British territory were removed.⁸²

Logistics problems delayed the move of the 13,000 men of the 1st Brigade from the Congo to Nigeria for several more months. Higher priority events such as rushing reinforcements to fight the Japanese in the Far East and the Germans in the Mediterranean, and moving American forces and supplies to Britain kept Allied shipping busy in the first half of 1942. The few American cargo ships calling at Matadi did not have adequate facilities for the voyage of two or three days between Matadi and Lagos, and no suitable roads existed. Belgian leaders were worried about deteriorating morale and health among encamped troops by the humid Congo River and in Leopoldville, as well as rising dissatisfaction among some civilian and military leaders in the restless colony. 83

Even after the brigade finally reached Nigeria in July 1942, its usefulness was limited by the need to rearm with compatible Anglo-American armaments. The Belgians could no longer get 7.65mm ammunition or small arms parts, so they had to buy American arms; if they were going to survive a major battle in North Africa, they also needed more artillery, automatic weapons and guns to counter tanks and aircraft. Another irony for the unfortunate 1st Brigade was that

 $^{^{82}}$ FO 123/557 (Aveling to Spaak, 9 Oct 41; Spaak to Oliphant, 15 & 24 Dec 41), /561: 1038 (Roberts & Makins to Oliphant, 9 Jan & 5 Feb 42).

⁸³ FO 371/30784: C3885 (Thomas to Harrison, 11 Apr 42), C4120 (Hope Gill to FO, 16 Apr 42), C4227 (Myrtle to Thomas, 16 Apr 42). Lingering Force Publique dissatisfaction prompted a short-lived mutiny in Leopoldville in May 1942. Van Aal, *Télémemoires*, 161-2.

the main operational reason for its being in Nigeria disappeared only four months after it disembarked, when French West Africa joined the Free French cause in November 1942.84

In early 1943, the Belgian government asked the British to move the 1st Brigade from Nigeria to the Middle East. This did occur within a few months, but the colonial troops continued to be adversely affected by conflicting Belgian political and British military objectives. The British commander in the Middle East wanted the troops from the Congo only for guarding supplies and key points in occupied Cyrenaica, but the Belgian government wanted the move to eventually result in combat and glory against Axis forces. Even the commander of the Force Publique was so intent on fighting the Germans that he deluded himself into thinking his eager troops could survive against determined Wehrmacht defenders. Perhaps he was too impressed by the accomplishment of the determined 1st Brigade when its transport sections survived an unprecedented 3598-mile journey from Nigeria to Cairo in mid-1943. 2000 men drove 800 military trucks across desert, rivers and along remote trails with a remarkably low wastage rate of five percent.85 Similar perseverance had enabled their 3rd Brigade compatriots to defeat both the Abyssinian terrain and larger Italian colonial forces. However, these excellent individual qualities would still not compensate for the superior firepower, mobility and organisation of potential German opponents.

Frustrated by the British refusal to change the 1st Brigade's role in the Middle East, the Belgians offered later in 1943 to send it to Burma on the premise that the native troops would be useful in the jungle. Eager Belgian politicians even offered to send Force

⁸⁴ WO 106/2892: 9 (Baillet-Latour to WO, early 1941), 14 (HQ W.Africa Forces meetings, 5-6 & 10 Aug 41); Charles, Forces, 87. Matters were not improved by disappointing arms deliveries for the Force Publique, which often totaled only a third or a half of requested amounts. PREM 3/69A: 119 (Brooke to Churchill, 25 May 42).

⁸⁵ FO 371/34311 (all 1943): C1142 (Cartier to Eden, 28 Feb; Eden to Oliphant, 29 Feb), C1153 (Lambert to FO, 29 Jan), C1772 (Spaak to Oliphant, 13 Feb), C10870 (Cartier to Eden, 13 Sep); A. Velaers, G. Deman, J. Dargent, De Nigérie en Egypte (Leopoldville: Courrier d'Afrique, 1947), 11-2, 35, 164-76.

Publique replacements to Libya if the 1st Brigade moved to Southeast Asia, and added that Belgian paratroopers were available for active operations anywhere. Anglo-Belgian military discussions determined that Burma was too remote for Belgian interests, and therefore would generate little enthusiasm among the Eurocentric white officers and sergeants. 6 Logistical and training complications, such as supply, language, reinforcements, and poorly-educated soldiers, provided the British with many good reasons to reject the Belgian offers. The lack of suitable armament and sufficient officers in the Force Publique, combined with adverse weather and racial climates, made its use in Europe unlikely as well. Success on the battlefield and in getting adequate Anglo-American reinforcements meant that the Allies were able to keep the disappointed brigade in garrison duties until its return to the Congo in late 1944. 87

The return of the unblooded 1st Brigade produced mixed reactions in the Congo. The official explanation of the return was the plausible reason that European and native manpower was needed for expanded mining and agricultural production. Unofficially, many blamed the Belgian government for not being forceful enough to get the 1st Brigade into active operations. This was true in one sense, because Gutt was not willing to reduce his small force in Britain in order to fill enough officer and European sergeant positions to enable Force Publique units to master more complicated and powerful weapons. In contrast to the 89 Europeans in British African infantry battalions used in East Africa and Burma, the Force Publique had only 28. The real priority of the Belgians' fighting fever became clearer

⁸⁶ The Belgian government considered sending the 1st Brigade to S.E. Asia because a medical unit from the Congo had been approved for duty there. FO 371/34311 (all 1943): C6405 (Oliphant to Eden, 5 Jun), C10870 (Cartier to Eden, 13 Sep), C12678 (Gillaert & Beaumont-Nesbitt meeting, 6 Oct); FO 954/43: 7 (Eden to Oliphant, 23 Sep 43). British East African troops fought in Burma later. Mercer, Chronicle, 586.

⁸⁷ FO 371/34311 (all 1943):C13465 (Beaumont-Nesbitt, 4 Nov),
/38884A: C10379 (Intelligence summary, 8 Aug 44); WO 106/2896 (Port
Said to CinC W.Africa, 8 Dec 44). Four battalions of the 1st Brigade
left the Middle East for home in Dec 1944; two other battalions had
already returned from Nigeria in Nov 1943.

in July 1944 when Force Publique officers and European sergeants were offered positions in the Piron Brigade that was preparing to go to Normandy. Subsequent combat operations by this unit and other Belgian forces in Europe would quench the Belgian government's obsession with glorious revenge against Germany; these activities will be analysed in Chapter VI.

A more glamorous way for over 200 Belgians in the Congo to strike back at the Axis was to complete flight training in South Africa. The original plan in June 1941 was to send new aviators back to the Congo to form a new colonial air force. Military missions were exchanged between the Congo and South Africa at that time in order to manage the flight program, as well as armaments and logistics matters. By When aircraft were not sent to the Congo by the time the first group graduated in late 1942, many of the Belgians went to the 12th Squadron of the South African Air Force in the Mediterranean area. This unit flew Boston and Marauder medium bombers over North Africa and Italy, and some of its members later rose to prominence in the postwar Belgian Air Force.

The 10th Congo Casualty Clearing Station also deserves mention here, especially since it did go to Burma in early 1944 and served for several months as an example of what Belgians and Congolese could accomplish in Southeast Asia. Led by Dr. (Col) A.G. Thomas, this field hospital worked with distinction from 1941 to 1943 in campaigns in Abyssinia and Madagascar before completing training in Ceylon to prepare for the Burma campaign. The 300 members of this unique unit

⁸⁸ An infantry battalion has about 1,000 men. FO 371/30803: C12010 (Carlisle to Wouters, 16 Sep 42), C13073 (Wouters to Carlisle, 21 Dec 42). Congolese were encouraged to share Belgian military glory in Africa (or Burma), but not with the Piron Brigade in Belgium. Racial bias was common among the Allies, and the Belgians were no worse than the segregationist Americans. Lingeman, Know, 340, 358.

 $^{^{89}}$ Charles, Forces, 91; CREH, 1 E4 (Belgo-S.African Agreement, 23 Jun 41); FO 432/7: 42 (Joint to Eden, 21 Jul 41).

⁹⁰ James Halley, The Squadrons of the RAF and Commonwealth 1918-1988 (Tonbridge, Kent: Air-Britain, 1988), 543; Musée de l'Air (Brussels) exhibit, "Les Belges dans la Seconde Guerre Mondiale" (Sep 1994); Charles, Forces, 92.

later served in India until 1946, placing them among the last Belgian veterans to return home after active campaign service. 91

Part 5. Conclusion

The huge colony of the Belgian Congo was a great asset to the Belgian government and the Allied cause in the Second World War, in spite of the great political and logistical challenges that arose in the process of exploiting its resources. The quantity and variety of raw materials in the huge colony justified the effort of British missions and propaganda to improve the Congo's cooperation with the Allies. None of the Congo's mineral and agricultural products were irreplaceable, but some of them were hard to find or especially useful. Among the most significant items for the British were industrial diamonds, gold, copal resin and copper. Britain also purchased less critical materials from the Congo and other Allied colonies in Africa primarily to create economic stability and good will to help the war effort. Such measures also made selling raw materials from Africa to the Axis less attractive, similar to Allied preclusive purchases in neutral Europe. 92

When the United States formally entered the Second World War, the volume of trade between the Congo and the Allies increased. Even though the Anglo-American Combined Board system took over management of Allied supplies, shipping and production, there was still much direct interaction by the Congo and the Belgian government with the United States on financial and economic matters. Most of the actions by the Belgian Purchasing Mission in New York concerned the Congo, as did a significant portion of Belgian shipping activity. In military, political, and many supply matters involving the Belgians, however,

 $^{^{91}}$ Gerard, <code>Battre</code>, 395-7; Charles, <code>Forces</code>, 90-1. Transferring the Congo's field hospital to Ceylon in mid-1943 probably encouraged the Belgians a few months later to offer colonial infantry as well for that war zone. FO 371/34311: C6405 (Oliphant to Eden, 5 Jun 43).

⁹² FO 371/24284: C9953 (FO to ConsGenl, 15 Sep 40), /34306: C10900 (Min. of Information Overseas Planning Committee, 21 Sep 43); W.N. Medlicott, The Economic Blockade, 2 vols. (London, HMSO, 1952-59), 2: 56. The 1944 uranium pact (in Part 2) was also preclusive.

the Americans let the British continue to predominate.93

The thankless task of dealing with the Belgian Minister of Colonies belonged primarily to the Foreign Office. Albert de Vleeschauwer was very jealous of his power and stressed to Whitehall and Leopoldville alike that he was the boss in all significant Congo matters. By 1944, even his fellow cabinet ministers pressured him to give more independence to his subordinate, Ryckmans. The latter had been Governor-General since 1934, with unmatched expertise from nearly three decades of colonial service. Unlike de Vleeschauwer, he was popular in the Congo. Like his boss, Ryckmans was also a hard worker and wary of the British. Though their rough personality edges often made it difficult for them to work with each other, their determined actions for the Allied cause made both men invaluable leaders for the Congo's war effort. Only very strong personalities could prevail against the big companies that controlled so much of Congo production and finances.⁹⁴

The contribution of the Force Publique to the Allied war effort was primarily political. It did not possess enough trained men, powerful weapons or independent mobility to make a strategic difference in campaigns in East or North Africa. Its battlefield actions in Abyssinia in 1941 were tactically skilful, and definitely helped to defeat the crumbling Italian armies there. It provided a reliable rear-area force from 1943 to 1944 in the Middle East, freeing better-trained Allied battalions to fight in Italy. The amount of military glory it gained for Belgium was proportional to the effort the Belgians put into it.

On the other hand, the Force Publique made the Belgians in the Congo feel that they were a part of the military war effort to defeat the attackers of their homeland. This helped to develop enthusiasm

 $^{^{93}}$ The British coordinated supply requirements for all the small exile governments, and also assisted the Free French and Turks. AVIA 38/1219: 1, 7, 12, 19-26.

 $^{^{94}}$ FO 371/38880: C8547 (Shepherd to Eden, 7 Jun 44); FO 425/421: C8147 (Shepherd to Eden, 6 Jul 43), /422: C14064 (Ledger to Eden, 2 Oct 44).

for the Allied cause, as well as generous donations to the British War Fund (more than £60,000), to the RAF (£250,000 for 48 aircraft), and to the Belgian relief effort (60,000 individual parcels). 95

The Belgian Congo and merchant marine adapted to new foreign connections, great wartime stress and unprecedented demands quite well in spite of top leadership that was sometimes too remote to appreciate their sacrifices. Since their achievements were usually far away from Belgium or Britain, many personnel involved in the activities analysed in this chapter were given little recognition by the Belgian government in London. Nonetheless, the seamen, miners, plantation workers, and Force Publique soldiers provided the strength of the reinforcements from overseas that enabled their exile government to continue acting like an independent world power.

 $^{^{95}}$ FO 371/48985: 9351 (Ledger to Eden, 11 Jul 45); BI, 26 Mar & 9 Apr 42. 350 (Belgian) Sqdn received some of the aircraft, all with names from the history or geography of the Congo. News 2 (1942): 88.

By 1942, the Belgian exile government had established a firm place in Britain as a dedicated ally against Germany and Italy, as well as the only free and legal representative of the Belgian people. Hubert Pierlot and his ministers could therefore spend more time and effort establishing their place among the other exiled Allies and the United States. Support from these other governments was vital to Pierlot and his Foreign Minister, Paul-Henri Spaak, as they sought to set up a more secure world for small countries such as Belgium. Special emphasis was placed on agreements with their Luxembourger and Dutch neighbours, support for international organisations such as the United Nations, and more formal politico-military ties with Britain. Alliance with the British in particular was a change from Belgium's strict prewar neutrality, conflicting with the unchanged views of King Leopold III.

The attitude of the king, and his effect on the Belgian people and their oppressors, was a constant concern of the exile government. Leopold III had been much more popular than the government in 1940, but his lustre had gradually become tarnished through his lack of involvement in national life. The inability to coordinate policies with King Leopold III was not Pierlot's only communications problem with occupied Belgium, however. British control of radio broadcasts limited the time and content of Belgian exile messages to their homeland, and differences over methods and goals in working with various Belgian Resistance groups caused some sharp disputes between the exiles and their hosts.

The issue that caused the most disagreement between the exiles and their host was the inherent conflict between the Anglo-American blockade policy and the urge to send food to the occupied countries to fight malnutrition and disease. The Belgians were the most persistent in their efforts, and were therefore more successful than others. But even the clamour of relief committees in Britain and the USA could not overcome most of the restrictions set up to negate the

benefits of occupation and coercion to the German war effort.

Part 1. A Place on the Allied Team

Hubert Pierlot and his government had proven themselves as valuable allies to the British since reaching London in 1940. As representatives of a sovereign nation, however, they needed to prove to other countries and to their own people that they were a voluntary ally, not just an appendage, of the British. It was not easy for a government to maintain an image of importance and independence when it was located in another country's capital, dependent on their hosts for supplies and shelter, and formally linked to other nations by foreign diplomats who were accredited to several governments at the same time. A significant example of this for the Belgians was the status of Anthony Biddle as the U.S. ambassador to six governments-in-exile in London. This reflected the American tendency to lump the exiles together as protégés of the British, ensuring that the Belgians would be treated as junior partners in Washington, D.C. as well as in London.

The decline in the number and cohesion of Belgium's diplomatic representatives in world capitals also contributed to her weakened international position. The ambassadors in Berne, Athens, Lisbon and Cairo were so weak in overcoming wartime confusion and challenges that they had to be replaced or propped up by stronger staffs. Most of Belgium's other legations had been closed by enemy action or occupation in Europe (May 1940-June 1941) and in eastern Asia (December 1941). Belgian interests in Spain continued to be represented by Belgian consuls, but other significant locations (as

¹ Being a minister plenipotentiary enabled one diplomat to be accredited to several governments. It was common in wartime London; even the Belgians used one diplomat for three exile governments. FO 371/30799: C11847 (Cartier to FO, 27 Nov 42), /38883: C9849 (Cuba and Argentina to MFA, 26 Jul 44): Joel Cang, ed., Who's Who of Allied Governments, 1943 (London: Allied Publications, 1943), 24.

² FO 371/32478: W16490 (Blake to ADM, 18 Nov 42); James Leutze, ed., The London Observer: The Journal of Gen. Raymond E. Lee, 1940-41 (London: Hutchinson, 1972), 255.

indicated) were covered by friendly neutrals such as the United States (Vichy France), Switzerland (Italy) and Sweden (Japan).³ However, the Belgian government was fortunate to have its most important diplomatic posts manned by strong, capable and cooperative leaders: Baron Emile Cartier de Marchienne in London and Count Robert van der Straten-Ponthoz in Washington, D.C.⁴

Another problem that blurred the Pierlot government's image as the master of its own affairs was the increasingly independent action and attitude of the Belgian Congo. Minister of Colonies de Vleeschauwer made the difficult journey to the Congo three times between late 1940 and late 1942 to strengthen the grip of the exile government in London on the huge and distant colony. He was reinforced in 1942 by Prime Minister Pierlot, and followed by special envoy Paul Tschoffen in 1943. The number and length of high-level visits to the Congo was proportional to the amount of raw materials and headaches it gave to the exiled Belgian government. Both categories were analysed in Chapter III.

Another positive result of the Belgian ministers' trips to the Congo was the strengthening of ties with Portugal. Diplomatic courtesies extended to the Portuguese minister of colonies in the Congo led to the first public Portuguese acceptance of the exile government as Belgium's legal representative, when Pierlot was treated as a head of government while travelling through Lisbon in 1942. This made it easier for Belgian refugees to live in or travel through Portugal. Portugal's location made it an important haven for escapees from occupied Europe, as well as a link between the Allies

³ FO 371/26341: C2036 (BritEmbB to PREM, 28 Feb 41), C5651 (FO (Mackenzie), 27 May 41); C10945 (BritEmbCairo to FO, 12 Sep 41), /30815: C2745 (BritEmbB to FO, 12 Mar 42).

⁴ FO 371/26341: C1096 (BritEmbUS, 31 Dec 40); Cang, *Governments*, 24. Cartier served in London from 1927 to 1946, while Straten-Ponthoz was in Washington, D.C. from 1934 to 1945. Boelaerts, "Archives," 10-11, 222.

 $^{^{5}}$ FO 425/421: C1873 (ConsGenl to Eden, 30 Jan 43); Van Aal, Télémemoires, 157-62.

and Axis for humanitarian, diplomatic and espionage purposes. It also lessened possible threats to the Belgian Congo from its Portuguese colonial neighbour, Angola.

Belgium committed itself as a firm member of a global effort by the Allies against the Axis powers on 1 January 1942 by signing the United Nations declaration to wage war to the utmost. Signatory countries included the other seven European governments-in-exile, Britain and the five major combatants of the Empire, the United States, China, the Soviet Union and nine Central American and Caribbean republics. None of the 26 signatories was to sign bilateral peace treaties with any of their enemies, and they all agreed to support the principles of the Atlantic Charter proclaimed by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill in 1941. The Charter principles that were to shape national policies included the following: national self-determination and democracy, freedom of the seas and open trade, improved work and social security standards, freedom from fear and want, and international peace by giving up arms and aggression.

The small exiled Allies increased their role in Allied affairs after committing themselves to this international declaration. On 31 July 1942, all eight exiled governments and the Free French asked President Roosevelt to issue a warning to the Axis powers, especially Germany, against the barbaric acts and cruelty being committed regularly in occupied countries. On 7 October, Roosevelt declared that a postwar commission would judge those guilty of mass murder and atrocities. The Allies announced more details ten days later in London, stating that postwar trials would use evidence primarily collected by the exiled governments. Belgium joined the inter-Allied

⁶ FO 371/30820: C10174 (BritEmbP to Eden, 21 Oct 42).

⁷ Churchill, War, 477-8. By mid-1945, 50 nations had signed the United Nations charter. Mercer, Chronicle, 262, 645. The different interests of so many co-belligerents made inevitable the Allied policy of unconditional surrender publicised after the Casablanca conference (Jan 1943), in order to avoid haggling among the Allies over terms with the Axis. Reynolds, "Churchill," 215-6.

declaration of 21 October 1942 against Axis looting in occupied territories, an action developed by Czechoslovakia to deter neutrals from storing items taken in large-scale German theft of personal and national treasures in conquered countries. Another worldwide warning with neutral countries in mind was given on 5 January 1943 by Belgium and 15 other Allies to threaten that financial transactions by Axis or collaborator authorities, especially in occupied territory, were liable to be invalidated later after Allied victory.

Less publicity was given to the mundane, but important, work done by the Inter-Allied Committee in London and its subcommittees. The main committee had been formed after the September 1941 meeting at St. James Palace among Britain, the Dominions, the Soviet Union and the exiled governments of occupied Europe. Subordinate Allied technical advisory committees soon followed, to focus on agriculture, nutrition, transportation and medical matters. Belgium was also a member of the Inter-Allied Information Committee, which coordinated media and exhibit activities, as well as the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (set up on 9 November 1943 in Washington, D.C.), which distributed relief supplies through national authorities in lands liberated by the Allies. 11

Membership of the smaller powers in committees with the major nations provided an appearance of Allied equality and brotherhood that was misleading. The United States, Britain and the Soviet Union, known as the Big Three, shared little power or information with their junior partners; they were even careful about what they shared with each other. It was therefore not surprising that the exiles were not invited to the critical strategy conferences at

⁸ Mercer, Chronicle, 319, 338, 340; FO 371/32221: W13366 (FO
(Ward), 21 Sep 42), /W13368 (FO, 28 Sep 42), /W14160 (FO, 21 Oct 42).

⁹ Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA), Occupied Europe: German Exploitation and Its Post-War Consequences (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), 66.

¹⁰ Ibid., 58.

¹¹ FO 371/39019: C528 (IAIC Jan-Jun 44, 30 Dec 43); RIIA, Occupied, 57-8.

Casablanca (January 1943), Yalta (February 1945) or Potsdam (July 1945), where decisions affecting their military or political future were made. The military staffs of the exiled governments were not part of the Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff Committee either, so they had very little say in the strategy of the campaigns that they were expected to support. Even Allied staff members of the organisation preparing for D-Day did not have access to entire strategic or operational plans. "Most Secret" information was not divulged to the exiled military unless absolutely necessary, and even then it would be in abridged form to protect sources. 12

Their small size, cultural differences and uncertain military reliability were all obvious reasons for being left out of top-level Anglo-American general strategy, but it must have been frustrating at times for the exiled governments as they waited to see what would happen. An attempt in 1942 by the Poles to get themselves and other exile governments into top-level Allied planning for future underground revolts was rebuffed by the British. The latter were concerned that the combined Allied staff proposed by General Sikorski for the international coordination of Resistance uprisings would duplicate Special Operations Executive (SOE) functions, get the exiles involved in military invasion and field operations plans, and complicate Allied strategy by involving a complex group where both agreement and security would be difficult. 13 More analysis on the participation of the Belgians and other small powers in high military echelons is included in Chapter VI sections on military missions attached to top Anglo-American headquarters after D-Day.

Although they continued to cooperate fully with the Big Three, especially the British, the exiled governments realised by 1942 that

 $^{^{12}}$ Churchill, War, 508, 643, 881-3, 943-4; WO 219/2269 (COSSAC to commanders ETOUSA and 21 AG, October 1943; AFHQ (Mediterranean) to SHAEF, 24 Jul 44).

¹³ Another reason for Anglo-American caution was the mistaken British belief that the Free French had compromised an unsuccessful Allied attack on Dakar in Sept 1942. David Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance*, 1940-45 (London: Macmillan, 1980), 83-5.

they would have to help each other as much as possible to reach goals beyond just military victory in a war between massive forces. The Belgians were the most successful in forming useful bonds with other small powers, particularly the Netherlands and Luxembourg. Precedent for links with the latter was the strongest, starting with the Belgium-Luxembourg customs union formed in 1922. The resulting elimination of tariff barriers was expanded in 1935 by the Belgium-Luxembourg Economic Union (BLEU), which created a common system of import-export licensing. The success of BLEU was the basis for the Benelux Customs Convention of 5 September 1944. A similar arrangement had been tried before with the 1932 Convention of Ouchy, which had been offered to other countries besides the three Benelux states; lack of international acceptance of special tariff reductions within the group caused the Ouchy convention to collapse. 14

Motivated by the experience of the Great Depression and the failure of isolationism, the Belgians were ready in 1942 to try harder in joining forces with their neighbours. In spite of lukewarm acquiescence by the British and initial indifference by the Dutch early in the year, Spaak pressed on with his efforts to forge stronger Belgo-Dutch bonds. He also worked carefully with the Luxembourg government, since it was touchy about its independent status. His efforts first paid off with the Belgo-Dutch Monetary Agreement on 21 October 1943. Under its terms, each central bank provided its own currency to the other central bank at a fixed rate of exchange, in order to finance all payments owed by the latter to the former. The exchange rate between the two currencies was fixed at 16.52 Belgian francs to 1 Dutch guilder, and included the Belgian and Dutch colonies. Since Luxembourg was already integrated within the Belgian banking system, with one of its francs equal to a Belgian

¹⁴ Vernon Mallinson, Belgium (London: E. Benn, 1969), 161; FO
425/422: C3925 (FO Research Department, 28 Sep 44).

¹⁵ FO 371/30802: C1200 (Eden-Oliphant, 29 Jan & 6 Mar 42), /C1714 (BritEmbNL to Eden, 12 Feb 42). Even Britain avoided assuming that Luxembourg was automatically covered by agreements with Belgium. FO 371/40387: U986 (Hood to Horner, 12 Feb 44).

franc, this bilateral agreement received its approval and compliance. 16

The next step was the Belgium-Netherlands-Luxembourg Customs
Union created on 5 September 1944. All three members would impose
the same import duties on third country imports, but none on each
other. Administrative councils were set up to advise on customs
duties, commercial agreements, subsidies, and foreign trade, as well
as to settle disputes. Implementation was delayed to a postwar date
when the three partners felt their economies were sufficiently
recovered to make such an important transition. This time the Dutch
and British were more supportive, the latter noting that the proposed
customs union would allow more coordinated, rational use of Antwerp,
Rotterdam and Amsterdam. The Belgians were also able to improve
their standing with the Dutch by extending credit on steel and
capital goods for postwar reconstruction in the Netherlands.¹⁷

Meanwhile, discussions with other exile governments showed that Belgium was concerned with both world and European security. In May 1942, Spaak and the foreign ministers of Norway (Lie) and the Netherlands (van Kleffens) discussed possible postwar security organisations. They concluded that American membership was crucial; this would avoid a fundamental problem of the feeble League of Nations. However, the Americans were much more concerned in 1942 with expedient wartime compromises than with postwar organisations. On the other hand, it must have been of some comfort to the exiled ministers that the American ambassador to their governments was sympathetic to their needs and concerns. 18

¹⁶ James Meade, Negotiations for Benelux: An Annotated Chronicle, 1943-56 (Princeton, USA: University Press, 1957), 3; FO 425/421: C12538 (Oliphant to Eden, 23 Oct 43).

¹⁷ Meade, Benelux, 6-8; FO 371/38885: C3697 (BritEmbNL to Eden,
20 Mar 44); Alan Milward, "The War, the Netherlands and the
Development of the EEC," in Holland at War against Hitler: AngloDutch Relations 1940-45, ed. M. Foot (London: Frank Cass, 1990), 207.

¹⁸ FO 425/420: C4681 (Eden to Bland, 6 May 42); Mercer, Chronicle, 47; Anthony Biddle, U.S. Ambassador to all the exiled governments in London, often lobbied the British on their behalf. Prior service in Norway and Poland made him aware of the security concerns of small countries. Liebling, "Diplomat," 59, 70-2, 82.

In spite of their successes with other small powers, the Belgians never forgot that Britain was the key to their military and political security within Europe. When he notified Eden of the Belgo-Dutch financial and customs agreements, Spaak emphasised his belief in closer collaboration among the Western powers. He felt that Britain needed to take a clear leadership position in a western European bloc, but Eden delayed any action by saying only that he would think about it. This response was prompted by the latter's concern for the fragile Anglo-American unity with the Soviets, who would assume any formal line-up of Western powers to be a threat. The British were also concerned that drawing too close to Belgium would result in other exile governments requesting similar arrangements, which might be unwise in the uncertain future of postwar Europe and Soviet actions. The "special relationship" with the Americans might also be soured if the British appeared to be moving their focus too much towards Europe. However, the British did help their smaller Allies several months later, when they overcame Soviet reluctance to allow the smaller Allies some political input to the European Advisory Commission (E.A.C.). 19

By 1944, the Belgian exiles had established a firm, but secondary, role in the Allied coalition. In light of their limited military forces and reliance on Anglo-American sources for supplies, bases and training, there was little that the Pierlot government could have done to raise their status to that of a major power. Pierlot sensibly recognised that changed wartime circumstances provided a new opportunity to improve Belgian national interests by long-term partnerships with other countries instead of isolated neutrality. Spaak in particular embraced a policy of international cooperation and commitment, placing Belgium in a leadership position among smaller powers that continued after 1945. The postwar legacy of Belgian international leadership started when Spaak was the first

 $^{^{19}}$ FO 425/422: C4394 (Eden to Oliphant, 23 Mar 44), C9447 (Aveling-Van Langenhove, 12 Jul 44). The E.A.C. was formed in late 1943, with membership limited to the Big Three. PREM 3/137/1 (E.A.C. Nos. 25 & 29, 5 & 14 Jul 44).

president of the United Nations General Assembly in 1946, and Gutt directed the International Monetary Fund from 1946 to 1951.²⁰

Part 2. Food: To Friend or Foe?

The British blockade of occupied Europe, when added to German looting and requisitions, made food and consumer goods difficult to get for ordinary citizens on the Continent. Food in particular fuelled forced labour in industries supporting the enemy war effort, and the British wanted to ensure that the Axis was pressured to take over burdensome responsibilities as well as helpful resources. Churchill had many vivid memories of the First World War that influenced his actions a quarter-century later, among them his tendency to see food as a weapon to be used against the enemy. This attitude was most probably influenced by the statements of General Erich Ludendorff, a powerful strategist who had praised the food relief program to Belgium from 1914 to 1917 as being helpful to the German war effort.²¹

The blockade affected Belgium very severely, because seventy percent of prewar calories consumed in Belgium were from imported food. Malnutrition soon affected the young in particular; even the Germans acquiesced in special programs such as food distribution by the Swedes in Brussels and three-month recuperation periods for children in Sweden and Switzerland. However, the legitimate case of the Belgians for food relief through the blockade was later preempted in Allied priorities by a two-year famine caused by the Germans in Greece. Nonetheless, persistence and strong financial resources allowed the Pierlot government to eventually set up and operate a relatively generous financial transfer and parcel program for Belgians in occupied Europe.

²⁰ Hervé Hasquin, *Dictionnaire d'histoire de Belgique* (Bruxelles: Didier Hatier, 1988), 237, 440.

²¹ FO 371/32480: W17582 (Camps to Maclean, 26 Dec 42).

 $^{^{22}}$ FO 371/32463: W6050 (Cammaerts to Foot, 20 Apr 42), /32476: W15115 (FO and British Legation in Stockholm, 4 & 19 Nov 42).

* * *

Winston Churchill made his policy on the blockade of Europe very clear on 20 August 1940:

There have been many proposals...that food should be allowed to pass the blockade....I regret that we must refuse these requests. The Nazis...have repeatedly stated that they possess ample reserves of food and that they can feed their captive peoples....The only agencies which can create famine in any part of Europe...will be German exactions or German failure to distribute the supplies which they command....Many of these valuable foods are essential to the manufacture of vital war materials. Fats are used to make explosives...plastic materials...used in the construction of aircraft are made of milk....Let Hitler bear his responsibilities to the full.²³

The British government was most reluctant to change its blockade policy without very strong justification, and without extremely good safeguards to ensure that food relief was distributed to legitimate beneficiaries. British lack of faith in making agreements with the Germans was understandable after Hitler had invaded the USSR (1941), Belgium (1940) and Czechoslovakia (1939) within three years of vows not to attack. Additional factors that supported the blockade policy included the difficulty of guaranteeing safe passage to relief ships against accidental attack, the notoriety of German authorities for treachery and looting, and the change in the official status of the United States from a generous neutral into an angry belligerent at the end of 1941.²⁴

On the other hand, Churchill was desperate for money in early 1941 to pay for war supplies. The Belgian government was the only one among the exiled Allies to help Britain, as mentioned in chapter III. This action helped British finances and Belgian public relations, and it also put Churchill in the position of owing Pierlot a favour. One month after they received the Belgian gold loan, the British authorised the Belgians as the first exile government to ship non-imported food within the blockade area to their occupied homeland

²³ Medlicott, Blockade, 1: 666.

²⁴ Jonathan E. Helmreich, *Belgium and Europe: A Study in Small Power Diplomacy* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 374-75; Churchill, *War*, 3-5, 134, 144, 157-8, 240, 454. Churchill also had personal memories of German viciousness in Belgium during the First World War.

for the specific relief of children under Red Cross supervision, in spite of continued unease about sending food through the blockade.²⁵

This action was still not enough to provide adequate nutrition for these children or to overcome the concern of the Belgian exiles and their humanitarian allies. The winter of 1940-1941 had been a very hard one for occupied Belgium, especially since the Germans had confiscated most of the potato crop and fruit. Potatoes were rationed, meat and fruit were scarce, and only certain categories (young children, pregnant women and the aged) could get rations for milk. Average daily adult intake was 1100 calories, less than half of the 2300 calories required by a man doing normal labour. The youth were equally lacking in calories, so almost everyone endured weight and energy loss, as well as less resistance to disease. This was the second humanitarian crisis in two generations for occupied Belgium, as the First World War had produced the same deprivation.²⁶

The Belgians energetically publicised the plight of their abused homeland in Britain, the United States and the Belgian Congo. Dr. E.J. Bigwood, Vice President of the Belgian Red Cross in Britain, published details of Belgian food shortages in 1941, which supported requests presented to the Foreign Office in early 1942 by Spaak and the Archbishop of York for approval to send Belgium dried milk and vitamins from outside the blockade area. Continued campaigns in 1942 began to get some support within the British government, as shown by a War Cabinet meeting on 2 June 1942 at which the heads of the Foreign Office and Ministry of Economic Warfare (MEW) argued in vain for dried milk to be allowed into Europe to counter humanitarian

²⁵ Schreiber, *Belgium*, 161; PREM 3/69A: W5837 (FO, 21 May 41).

 $^{^{26}}$ Simon Yudkin, "Nutrition in Belgium and Holland During the German Occupation and After Liberation," in Inter-Allied, 85-8; FO 371/32455: W669 (Belgian Secours d'Hiver, 19 Jun 41).

 $^{^{27}}$ E.J. Bigwood, "The Food Situation in Belgium," Belgium 2, no. 16 (1941), 5-6; FO 371/32460: W3329 (FO (Maclean), 23 Feb 42; Min. of Food to British Food Msn in USA, 9 Mar 42), W3526 (Spaak to Eden, 5 Mar 42).

pressures. The majority at the meeting felt that the burden of feeding occupied countries must stay with the Germans, and that concessions would inevitably be exploited by friend and foe alike. However, the need to placate British popular opinion grew so strong that MEW issued a public explanation of blockade and relief policies to members of Parliament on 15 February 1943.²⁸

The British government was also careful to ensure that the United States was equally firm on keeping a strong blockade after joining the war in December 1941. The Americans, known for their big farms and big hearts, had also been subjected to a well-organised campaign for Belgian relief. A former American ambassador to Belgium, Hugh Gibson, wrote in the Saturday Evening Post issue of 23 March 1942 that the U.S. and Britain were overreacting with such a strict blockade, and claimed that Germany had not seized any food. During his July 1942 visit to the United States, Pierlot visited Roosevelt and discussed ways to get more food to Belgium without significant damage to the blockade. Government leaders were also concerned that large ethnic groups in America would send huge quantities of food to relatives in occupied countries, as well as starting pressure for even more concessions, leading to inevitable benefits for the Germans.²⁹

In analysing the efforts of the Belgian exiles concerning shipping food through the blockade, it is important to understand Belgium's position relative to other Allies. This perspective allows a better understanding of the Anglo-American responses. The most important comparison in terms of food was Greece, which was invaded by the Germans in April 1941. As they had done elsewhere, the conquerors looted what they wanted and ruined much of the country. Since Greece had few industries or resources that could be easily exploited for the German war effort, the Third Reich had little

²⁸ FO 371/32464: W8238 (War Cabinet Conclusions, 2 Jun 42); PRO, Treasury (T) 160/1238: F17602 (MEW, April 1943).

 $^{^{29}}$ FO 371/32463: W6050 (McGeachy to Craig, 1 Apr 42), /32466: W9719 (FO to ConsGenl, 27 Jun 42); News 2 (1942): 219.

incentive to help the workers and their families overcome food shortages. The result was a terrible famine, killing 300,000 between 1941 and 1943 and forcing at least 20,000 overseas as refugees.³⁰

The loss of so many by starvation in a country of importance to Britain was catastrophic enough to justify extraordinary humanitarian action by the Allies, especially since the Mediterranean provided reasonable access to relief transportation. Shipments of wheat into Greece, and transport of refugees out the country, were provided by the Allies with the acquiescence of the German and Italian occupation authorities. Not only did the Greek catastrophe make the wealthier and better-organised Belgians appear less needy, but Greek requirements directly affected Belgian food plans. The British turned down a 1942 Belgian plan to ship Turkish food to Belgium via Italy, because of problems with submarines and a Foreign Office goal to reserve the Turkish food surplus for neighbouring Greece. 31

However, there was no Turkish housing surplus to help Greek refugees, due to centuries-old ethnic hatreds. Greeks were added to tens of thousands of Poles, Jews, colonial Italians and prisoners of war (POWs) whom the British needed to shelter for the duration of the war. Cyprus, the Middle East and British East Africa were already nearly full when the flood of Greek refugees started. 25,000 Italian POWs were moved from Kenya to the United States to make room for an equal number of Poles in Persia who needed to move on. In the summer of 1942, the British asked the Belgians to take approximately 5,000 Greeks as temporary settlers in the Congo. The exile government in London felt a moral obligation to help other refugees, but tried on behalf of the Leopoldville administration to get Poles instead of Greeks. Coming from a warm climate, the latter were considered more likely to stay as unwelcome foreign homesteaders. The Congo was not

 $^{^{\}rm 30}$ RIIA, Occupied, 48; FO 371/32650: W14237 (MinSt Cairo to FO, 30 Oct 42).

 $^{^{31}}$ The FO also knew that the Belgians had other food sources. FO 371/32457: W1426 (MEW to BelgEmbGB; FO (Maclean), both 9 Feb 42), /32458: W2527 (Min. of Food to FO, 16 Feb 42).

the first choice of the Greek exile government either, because there was no established Greek colony or permanent consul there to sponsor the new arrivals. A compromise was reached in a few months that allowed 3,000 Greeks to move into the southern and northeastern provinces of the Belgian Congo, with added British supplies and eventual Greek funding.³²

Hosting Greek refugees did little to help the Belgians in the Congo convince the British to allow food through the blockade into Belgium. Requests to send food parcels from the Congo to Belgium via Portugal continued to be turned down in Whitehall. By late 1942, the average adult daily ration in Belgium was 1570 calories versus 1300 in Greece. Furthermore, the Germans had imported 439,000 tons of cereal into Belgium in 1941 to keep workers in heavy industry adequately fed, in contrast to their brutal indifference to the Greeks.33 The Foreign Office supported their refusal with reports that hungry Belgians understood the need for the blockade to hinder the Germans, and that posters blaming the British for starving women and children were altered at night to show Hitler as the accused instead of Churchill.34 In short, unless there was widespread famine in a country that had favourable strategic and logistical connections with Britain, no exception to the blockade would be established.

However, the efforts of the Belgian Congo were not completely wasted. The potential negative publicity from wasting 20,000 Belgian Congo food packages already piled up in Liverpool was enough to

³² FO 371/32644: W9386 & 9862 (E. African Governors Conference to CO, 30 Jun & 9 Jul 42), /32645: W10180 (ConsGenl to FO, 20 Jul 42), W11365 (FO-MinSt Cairo, 19 Aug & 13 Oct 42), /32650: W14237 (FO to BritEmbUS, 15 Oct 42; MinSt Cairo to FO, 30 Oct 42). The Poles stayed well north of the Congo, closer to the 2nd Polish Corps and British lines of communication in the Mediterranean. Thomas, Volunteers, 8-9.

³³ Daily calories from average rations were 2250 in Germany and 2850 in Britain at that time. FO 371/32460: W3463 (Godding to ConsGenl, 16 Feb 42), W3479 (FO to ConsGenl, April 1942), /32476: W14406 (MEW to FO, 21 Oct 42); R.J. Hammond, Food, vol. 1 (UKCS) (London: HMSO, 1951), 387.

 $^{^{34}\,}$ FO 898/234 (Depuich interview, late 1941); FO 371/32460: W3479 (FO to ConsGenl, 11 Mar 42).

justify a one-time waiver for shipment to Belgium via Lisbon, after Belgian authorities in Leopoldville and London had agreed that no more packages would be sent from the Congo or accepted in Britain for transit to Belgium. The case for sending food to Belgium on a one-time basis in 1942 was probably helped by the country's low daily calorie rations compared to its neighbours: 1800 in the Netherlands and 2250 in Germany. Shipping the packages also improved the image of both the British and Belgian governments in the Belgian Congo at a time when Allied public relations needed a boost there.³⁵

British responses to the humanitarian food requests of the Belgians were influenced by the anticipated responses of other Allied exile governments besides the Greeks. Any favour to one country would be expected by the others, even if they also required financial help from Britain. This required delicate negotiations and astute decisions in London to keep discontent at a minimum among the exiles. For example, in response to a dangerous level of concern by Norwegian merchant seamen about their families in occupied Norway, a secret Anglo-Norwegian arrangement was set up in late 1942. 7,000 tons of food and baby clothes were to be shipped to neutral Sweden. cover story for this was that the goods were for Norwegians seeking refuge with their Swedish neighbours, but all involved felt that approximately 100 tons a week could be smuggled into Norway without the Germans noticing. The agreement also assumed that the efficient Norwegian Resistance would keep the smuggling discreet enough to avoid the attention of other exiled Allies who might demand similar favours. Allied governments sometimes manipulated offices within a government department in London or Washington, D.C., or played off the British and Americans against each other at top government levels. Some Americans also suspected that the British used blockade concessions to improve their own prestige at the expense of the

 $^{^{35}}$ FO 371/32466: W9719 (FO to ConsGenl, 27 Jul 42), /32476: W14406 (Table, MEW to FO, 21 Oct 42); FO 425/420: C6540 (Oliphant to Eden, 29 Jun 42). Another factor supporting the potential for near-starvation in Belgium was that consumption was usually 10-20% less than the official ration. FO 371/32455: W669 (Belgian Secours d'Hiver, 19 Jun 41).

United States.36

In early 1942, the British were finally nudged into an acceptable agreement that could regularly alleviate some of the pressure for food relief while keeping a strong blockade against the Germans. An Anglo-Belgian accord allowed £3,000 per month to be spent in Lisbon for food parcels to both adults and children in Belgium on behalf of Belgians in England, and served as the model for agreements with the Dutch and Free French. The contents and shipping points of the packages were thus kept within the blockade area, allowing the Allied cordon to stay intact around Axis territory. Other Allies were eligible as well, but some had no postal connections with Portugal. 37 The Belgian food supply office system in London, New York and Lisbon arranged to send food packages on behalf of individuals to Belgium from the latter location. Office du Colis Alimentaire also mailed Free French parcels, while the Dutch used the Red Cross.³⁸ International agreements also defined the size and content of these parcels from Lisbon as follows: 500 grams of Portuguese products, usually canned fish or dried fruit. "Luxury" items such as coffee, tobacco or children's clothing were also allowed at certain times.39

Separate relief plans were set up for other Allies, but the Belgians had the greatest funding. Gold from the Belgian Congo compensated for American restrictions and British shortages, so the

 $^{^{36}}$ FO 371/32475: W13855 (Halifax to FO, 15 Oct; FO (Steel), 19-22 Oct 42), /32477: W15287 (MEW to Eden, 4 Nov 42), W15592 (Halifax to FO, 17 Nov 42); Medlicott, Blockade, 1: 583.

³⁷ The British United Kingdom Commercial Corporation (UKCC) even assisted exile organisations in Portugal by combining their needs for bulk purchases at wholesale prices. FO 371/32470: W10898 (MEW to BritEmbUS, 14 Aug 42), /32472: W11908 (Hall to Drogheda, 20 Aug 42); T 160/1238: F17602 (MEW to DO, 5 Aug 42; BritEmbP to MEW, 10 Apr 43).

³⁸ T 160/1228: F17183/06 (Belgian government, 1 May 42; BritEmbUS to MEW, 6 Aug 42), /1238: F17602 (MEW to DO, 5 Aug 42); FO 371/32472: W11908 (BelgEmbUS to Hiss, 27 Jul 42). The Americans were so wary of possible Belgian circumvention of US blockade trade policy that some messages from New York to the Lisbon supply office were cancelled in mid-July 1942.

 $^{^{39}}$ FO 898/230, 37; T 160/1238: F17602 (MEW to DO, 5 Aug 42).

Belgians were the first in getting British approval for very large bulk shipments from Portugal and for a separate plan using Swiss resources to take care of refugees outside of Belgium. The latter arranged for \$40,000 worth of small packages to be sent each month to eligible Belgians in occupied Europe outside of Belgium on behalf of non-Belgian individuals in Allied or neutral countries. Eligible Belgian beneficiaries outside of Belgium had to be related to the non-Belgian sender, or have a bank account accessible in Allied or neutral territory, or be on public relief. Detailed conditions such as these indicate that complex bargaining was necessary to make this program possible.40 The Belgian Congo paid for 25 percent of the parcels going from Lisbon to occupied Belgium. More help from the colony to Belgium came from transfers within a company from accounts in the Congo to accounts in Belgium, which made the money available to needy relatives. A special agreement to use 10 million Spanish pesetas during 1943 to help Belgian exiles in Spain was another first for Belgian Finance Minister Gutt among the exile governments.41

Less controversial relief plans involved prisoners of war (POWs) and civilian internees. Belgium had 80,000 POWs left in Germany, after the Flemish prisoners had been repatriated in an attempt to curry favour with this more "Germanic" group. 42 The Belgian government bought food and uniforms in bulk from Canada for its POWs, and got a lot of help with additional packages from the

⁴⁰ FO 371/32472: W11908 (Hall to Drogheda, 20 Aug 42; BelgEmbGB to FO, 27 Jul 42). The Dutch and Yugoslavs also used Swiss assets to help exiled compatriots in Europe. Anglo-American restrictions limited total annual Allied exile spending in Switzerland to £500,000, to avoid overtaxing Swiss resources or Allied gold reserves. T 160/1238: F17602 (MEW to Treasury, 26 Feb 43).

 $^{^{41}}$ T 160/1228: F17183/06 (Between Waley & Baillet-Latour, 10 Apr & 5 May 41), /1238: F17602 (Harmer to Fraser, 3 Mar 43); FO 371/32470: W10898 (BritEmbUS to MEW, 6 Aug 42).

⁴² 150,000 Flemings were released by the Germans between July 1940 and February 1941. Nearly 800 more Belgians escaped during the rest of the war to join the Resistance or Belgian exile forces. This left nearly 70,000 Belgians in German POW camps, along with 1.1 million French, 133,000 Yugoslavs and 57,000 Poles (as of Dec 1942). Charles, Forces, 58; FO 371/36375: W4051 (Red Cross to MEW, 3 Mar 43). See Part 4 of this chapter (i.e. FO 898/97) and chapter VI (i.e. FO 371/49033) concerning Belgian civilians held in Germany.

American and British Red Cross. Belgian POWs were sent 200 food parcels a week via the British Red Cross, as well as some clothing. Relief sent to the prisoners differed greatly by nationality, due to financial and political factors. British POWs received six times the packages that French ones did, according to the International Red Cross. The War Cabinet was relieved that Vichy government responses, such as the French exchange of labour "volunteers" for prisoners in August 1942, were primarily aimed at helping French POWs rather than retaliating against British largess. The Germans tried to exploit differences in parcel benefits among Allied prisoners, but had limited success.

Another humanitarian plan that received cooperation from the German and Allied governments was the sending of Belgian children to Switzerland for three months of rest and recuperation. By June 1942, 900 children from occupied Belgium were in temporary Swiss homes getting the nourishment that they needed; others were being cared for in Sweden. Plans for more permanent evacuation of these children were discarded because of concern from parents and the British government. The British argued that long evacuations of Greek children away from their parents had not worked out well in similar circumstances, and that a large group of evacuated children would be difficult to support without imports through the blockade.⁴⁵

All of these plans together helped many people in occupied Europe, especially those with easier lines of communication to the neutral countries linking them to Allied and humanitarian groups.

Nonetheless, malnutrition and deprivation were widespread. Since later German shortages decreased their ability to help the Belgians

 $^{^{43}}$ FO 371/32480: W17149 (BritEmbUS-MEW, 11 & 14 Dec 42), /36375: W436 (FO, 5 Jan 43).

 $^{^{44}}$ FO 371/32462: W5412 (FO (Maclean, Steel), 15 & 17 Apr 42); Mercer, Chronicle, 324, 453.

⁴⁵ FO 371/32566: W9117 (Dingle Foot to FO, 26 Jun 42), W10003 (FO to BritEmbUS, 24 Jul 42); News 2 (1942), 27-8. The unsettling evacuation of London children in 1939 also showed the negative aspects of long parent-child separations. Mack, London, 17-9.

with food, it was fortunate that the 1943 harvest was a good one and the black market was available to those who could afford it. 46

Fortunately for the British, anxiety about their hungry compatriots did not result in prolonged hostility between the exiled governments and their host in London. 47 By late 1942, it was obvious to the exiles that a strong Anglo-American blockade would continue. It also seemed that a probable Allied victory would occur within a few years, allowing relief supplies to enter their battered homelands. Stockpiling for use in immediate relief action after liberation therefore became an attractive alternative for the Allied exiles. To maintain fairness and control in the competition for goods, the British soon established the Inter-Allied Relief Bureau (IARB) to prepare estimates of needs and coordinate plans of action. 48

By 1944, when the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) took over planning responsibility from the IARB, many foods were reported as being difficult or impossible to find in Belgium. Supplies from stockpiles in the Congo and Allied warehouses were necessary to improve Belgian nutrition and morale after liberation in September 1944, although the country was in better condition than expected.⁴⁹ Chapter VI will discuss this in more detail.

⁴⁶ Lukacs, European War, 198; RIIA, Occupied, 27; Yudkin, "Nutrition," Inter-Allied, 86.

 $^{^{47}}$ FO 371/32464: W8238 (War Cabinet Conclusions, 2 Jun 42). The Belgian and Dutch representatives to the (Anglo-American) MEW Blockade Committee rarely attended meetings to avoid confrontations. Medlicott, Blockade, 1: 615.

⁴⁸ FO 371/32426: W5930 (Parliamentary question, 16 Apr 42), W6443 (Ronald to Eden, 18 Apr 42), 32458: W2527 (Min. of Food to FO, MEW, etc., 16 Feb 42). Stockpiles in the Congo for postwar Belgian use concerned the FO, because they reduced raw materials available for Allied reserves or "surges;" the Belgians insisted the items were surplus to Allied contracts. FO 425/421: C6994 (Eden to BritEmbB, 10 Jul 43); FO 371/40388: U5165 (BelgEmbUS to UNRRA, 28 Apr 44).

⁴⁹ RIIA, *Occupied*, 57-8. Even in the black market, it was hard to find items such as butter, cooking oil, and ham; beef, fat, cheese, macaroni, wine and beer were unobtainable. FO 371/38878: C2586-87 (LRC interviews, 19 Feb 44), C12723 (BritEmbB to FO, 24 Sep 44).

Part 3. The War of Words

Radio broadcasts in many languages to conquered peoples were started from Britain in 1940, and soon listening to national programs on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Political Warfare Executive (PWE) stations became popular and forbidden pastimes for those in Hitler's shadow. The Pierlot government supplemented its BBC support with its own radio transmitter in the Congo, as well as by prolific output from information agencies in London and New York. British control and different priorities on sending radio messages to occupied Belgium led to frequent conflict with the Belgian exiles. The latter feared major social and political repercussions if insufficient exile assistance reached those suffering from the German occupation. The Belgian government was very concerned about its popular support, and therefore worried about its ability to control the delicate transition back to democracy during the chaotic period when the Allied armies were advancing through Belgium and the Germans and their collaborators were retreating.

The inability to boost morale in their homelands with adequate food relief made propaganda and communications even more important to Pierlot and the other prime ministers in London. All of the exiled governments argued with the British over the content of air-dropped leaflets or BBC broadcasts to occupied Europe. To prevent disputes between the exiles and the War Cabinet from festering into rancour that would harm the Allied war effort, the governments in London used the British Foreign Secretary as an arbitrator. Beginning in 1943, the Belgians gained a little more clout with the British and a lot more radio time with their compatriots in Europe and Africa from a new and powerful radio station in Leopoldville. On the other hand, covert propaganda stayed under tight British control. The Belgian government was not even told of the real purpose of the first "Freedom Station" (code name Research Unit B) for which the PWE

recruited a Belgian staff.50

Recognising the power of words and ideas in wartime, the British established the Foreign Publicity Directorate (FPD) in the Ministry of Information the day after declaring war on Germany in 1939. This new office was to handle propaganda for overseas audiences, excluding the British Empire, United States and Axis belligerents. During 1939 and 1940, the FPD was ineffective compared to the Germans. It had less central direction and more competition from other news agencies than did Josef Goebbels' powerful and experienced organisation. FPD propaganda appeared more plausible later, after the Battle of Britain and a harsh German occupation changed popular perspectives in Europe. 52

repertoire soon after the German occupation of France in the summer of 1940. Staff members of the Belgian section of the BBC developed one of the most famous radio campaigns of the war in 1941. "V for Victory" was the brainchild of Victor de Laveleye, in charge of the BBC's Belgian section. He was told in late 1940 that Belgian families were punished because their children were caught drawing "RAF" on walls; a quicker way to get an anti-German message up was needed. He chose "V" as a symbol of Victoire (French), Victory and Vrijheid (Dutch for Freedom), because it was easily drawn and could be signalled with two fingers. De Laveleye broadcast his proposal to Belgium in French on 14 January 1941, and two weeks later the BBC

⁵⁰ Charles Cruickshank, The Fourth Arm: Psychological Warfare, 1938-1945 (London: Davis-Poynter, 1977), 53-6; FO 425/421: C12742 (Shepherd to Eden, 15 Oct 43).

⁵¹ Robert Cole, Britain and the War of Words in Neutral Europe 1939-45: The Art of the Possible (London: Macmillan, 1990), 7-9. The speeches of Churchill and Hitler, probably the most powerful speakers of the war, increased the importance of propaganda. A great orator would have helped the Belgians a lot.

⁵² FPD was also hampered by competition from the British Official Wireless and Reuters Wire Service, as well as by insufficient British newspaper reporting on the Continent and by zealous military censors. Another challenge to the FPD that the Germans did not have was the need to consider the sensitivities of exile governments such as the touchy Belgians. Ibid., 10, 14-5, 18-9, 23, 47; FO 898/230: 15.

broadcast it in Dutch. The "V" became popular quickly in Belgium and France as a sign of defiance and hope, and then it spread to other countries in occupied Europe within a few months. The "V" campaign was especially strong in Belgium and France, producing record sales of chalk in 1941! A "V" theme continued into 1942 as the BBC used it as a call sign by using the first notes of the Fifth Symphony by Beethoven to produce a Morse code "V" ("...-").53

This success helped to establish a receptive audience for the BBC, which worked continuously to convince the subjugated Europeans and their German occupiers that the Allies would win, with important help from Continental resisters. Each week the PWE would give the BBC national sections specific items to emphasise, after consulting the exile government on sensitive issues. One of the latter was listing traitors by name; sometimes Belgian sources had useful information that could strengthen or cancel the accusations. Another feature of the BBC that endeared it to audiences in occupied Europe was the passing of personal messages from friends and relatives in exile. These were usually coded or generalised to avoid leading the Germans to the recipients. Equally treasured by exiles were the rare postcards that reached them from loved ones in occupied Europe, even though they were heavily censored. The mail was also very slow; for example, it took several months for postcards from Belgium to reach Britain via Lisbon.54

Pierlot and his ministers used the BBC often to reach audiences in French, Dutch and English, but the draft speeches had to be approved by PWE or FO officials first. The rare British rejections were usually caused by differences of perspective rather than of policy. The British experiences with the Blitz of 1940-1941,

⁵³ Victor de Laveleye, "The History of the V Sign," *Message* 27 (1944), 21-2; Cruickshank, *Fourth Arm*, 121-5, 128. British graffiti warfare in 1942-43 was reinforced by airdropped "1918" stickers, but they were not as popular as the original chalk "V". FO 898/238: 144. Churchill's hand-signal "V" also became popular.

 $^{^{54}}$ FO 371/30780: C123 (PWE to BBC Belgian Service, 3-9 Jan 42), C345 (BelgEmbGB-FO, 7 & 20 Jan 42); Kneale, "Half a Victory,"95, 112.

shortages of food and consumer goods, and German ferocity in battle were very unpleasant, but were still milder than the suffering on the Continent. The Belgian exiles had not only personal experience from the German occupation of 1914-1918 and the destructive Wehrmacht advance of 1940, but they frequently received horrible news from escapees and intelligence reports concerning friends, relatives and hometowns devastated by German terror, lack of food, or Allied bombs. The Anglo-Belgian topics that were affected the most by differing points of view included sabotage (how much before German reprisals made it counterproductive), the blockade (German responsibility versus nutrition), King Leopold III (avoiding controversy versus national solidarity) and Allied bombing (crippling the German war effort versus civilian losses). Belgian politicians outside the government also got BBC air time to address Belgian and Dutch audiences, but their leader (Camille Huysmans) complained that it was not enough.55

It was true that the Belgians got less time to broadcast than other exile governments, but comprehension of the French and Dutch national programs gave the Walloon and Flemish parts of Belgium extra opportunities to enjoy the BBC broadcasts. Since news was available on the French and Dutch programs, Radio Belgique/België concentrated on music and commentaries; this caused some Belgian listeners to prefer the foreign broadcasts. The Pierlot government got more time later on the BBC when Radiodiffusion Nationale Belge (RNB) started in February 1943. However, the big boost to Belgian propaganda efforts came in May 1943, when RNB Leopoldville was established in the Belgian Congo with a powerful transmitter that broadcast nearly eight hours a day. The programs contained a mix of local material, family messages, and retransmitted items from London (BBC) and New York,

⁵⁵ FO 371/34302: C686 (De Sausmarez to FO, 16 Jan 43), /38875: C4009 (Belgian broadcast for BBC, 22 Apr 44); FO 898/232: 151-3

giving the Belgians a unique link to their homeland.56

PWE operated another radio link to Belgium, part of a secret chain of "Research Units" (RUs) that the British used for morale, training and operations activities with Resistance units throughout Europe. The emphasis was on demoralising and hindering the Germans without the restraints of the political baggage or postwar agenda of the exile governments. In return for partial editorial input to broadcasts, the Belgians and other exiled governments later agreed to help SOE with new agents and PWE by financing activities supporting deported or escaping workers. The RUs continued to be secret British-run stations, providing both practical information and humour to help the Resistance.⁵⁷

Leaflets were used in great quantities to supplement radio propaganda. Converted RAF bombers dropped 1.3 million leaflets, newspapers and journals on Europe from late 1939 to mid-1944. While the printed propaganda effort was appreciated by the producers (PWE) and the recipients (usually civilians in northwestern Europe), both felt that the amount dropped, only ten percent of PWE requests, was not enough. However, both the air force leaders and their crews were reluctant to risk scarce resources to drop mere paper. 58

The Belgians in particular wanted more leaflets, since only one percent of British production went to their nation. Several factors worked against sending more written propaganda to Belgium. Printed material for Belgium required a bilingual format that slowed production and increased size, which reduced the quantity that could be placed in a crowded bomber. The excessive involvement of Spaak

⁵⁶ In late 1942, Allied daily BBC broadcast hour totals were France 4½, Poland 2, Netherlands 1 3/4, Norway 1½ and Belgium 1. FO 371/30780: C11782 (BBC to FO, 25 Nov 42), /38878: C486 (LRC Interview (Buisseret) to FO, 31 Dec 43); FO 898/238: 125.

⁵⁷ Cruickshank, Fourth Arm, 103-06; FO 898/68: 84-6, 91-9. Sharp satire was used to lampoon the Germans (i.e. "General Schweinhund") and collaborators (i.e. portrayed as feeling safer fighting Russians than being among Belgian miners). FO 898/57: 16, 51-3.

⁵⁸ FO 898/470: 209; Cruickshank, Fourth Arm, 89-93. Balloons proved ineffective for the unpopular PWE propaganda drops, so the equivalent of one British and one American bomber squadron did it.

(as the Belgian Minister of Information) and Gutt (a former journalist and author) also hampered operations until early 1941, when a compromise with the MEW was agreed on. Exile input to leaflets increased during the war, but PWE editing and Anglo-American airdrops remained essential to ensure a consistent quality and efficiency to the Allied printed propaganda campaign. In spite of their popularity with Belgian recipients, the German threat to leaflet carriers in the air and on the ground meant that only ten percent of the population in Belgium were able to receive printed Allied propaganda. Allied propaganda.

The combined effect of radio and leaflet propaganda on the listeners in Belgium was considerable, and helped to make the Belgian exile government more popular. The truthfulness of BBC broadcasts was very important to the news-hungry Belgians, who scorned the self-serving dishonesty of the German radio. ⁶² Underground newspapers used facts and articles from popular airdropped leaflets such as the "Courrier de l'Air;" leaflet photographs were even used in great quantity by the famous La Libre Belgique. Leaflets were passed on carefully to as many Belgians as possible, and were savoured for their news, maps and photographs. ⁶³

Intensive German countermeasures against Allied radio and leaflet propaganda were proportional to their effectiveness.

Broadcasts by the BBC and RNB were heavily jammed, and those caught

⁵⁹ FO 898/238: 116-21, /470: 266; Cruickshank, *Fourth Arm*, 91-2. The Belgian people definitely needed bilingual propaganda: 40% only spoke French and 46% only spoke Flemish. FO 898/231: 101, 105.

 $^{^{60}}$ FO 898/450: 27. At first, the British had created and dropped leaflets on Belgium without coordination, which naturally angered the Pierlot government. FO 800/309: 79-80.

⁶¹ FO 898/238: 116.

⁶² FO 898/234: 112-4, /238: 115. A decline in the popularity of the King's court, German losses in Russia, and a harsh occupation improved the Pierlot government's image as the best hope for the future of Belgium. FO 371/30783: C10684 (Refugee Intelligence Dept to FO, 30 Oct 42). A lack of alternatives was at least as important as Allied propaganda in improving Pierlot's status in Belgium.

⁶³ FO 898/470: 275-7.

listening to Allied programs were subject to radio confiscation, fines or even prison. Collaborator newspapers attempted to counter the habit of listening to the BBC by urging their readers to turn their radio dials to German stations for more suitable commentaries, music, and news. Each significant broadcast, such as a Pierlot speech or major war bulletin, prompted an enemy commentary. BBC broadcasts of tougher penalties for Belgian traitors and exposés of German duplicity caused many resignations of collaborator party members during 1942 and 1943, and one newspaper blamed the BBC as the chief inspiration for avoiding German compulsory labour service.

While words from Britain filled minds and hearts rather than stomachs, most people in Belgium and other occupied countries took comfort in the BBC themes of inevitable Allied victory, contributing to German defeat through passive as well as active resistance, and the promise of help before and after liberation. By 1943, radio and leaflet success had also helped to establish a more receptive environment in Belgium for strengthening ties among the Belgian exile government, British agencies (PWE and SOE) and the Resistance.⁶⁶

Part 4. Links with the Resistance

The links between the Belgian exile government and the Resistance groups that were gradually forming in occupied Belgium developed slowly, due to exile concern about the authoritarian and leftist influences prevalent in some of them. British dominance of communications and sabotage operations also complicated matters for the insecure Pierlot regime. By the beginning of 1944, however,

⁶⁴ FO 898/238: 127. Some listeners found comfort in a voice representing freedom, even if the news was bad. Anne Brusselmans, Rendezvous 127: The Diary of Mme Brusselmans, MBE (London: Benn, 1954), 53.

⁶⁵ FO 898/97 (Resistance Diary No. 33, 9 Jul 44), /238: 115, 142.

⁶⁶ FO 898/231: 6; W. Ugeux, "Quelques considérations techniques et morales sur l'expérience de guerre psychologique menée en Belgique occupée entre 1940 et 1945," European Resistance Movements 1939-45 (ERM), Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on the History of Resistance Movements, Brussels, Sept 1958, (London: Pergamon, 1960), 177.

stronger bonds among the Pierlot government, British agencies and a better-organised underground network enabled the Resistance to be a more important influence on both Allied and German-collaborator activities. A critical but uncertain factor in Allied plans was the influence and attitude of King Leopold III. His popularity declined during this time, but his stubborn nature did not diminish during his palace arrest. The key position of Leopold in national politics made his attitudes and potential actions more important as the day of national liberation and the awkward reunion of the king and the government became closer.

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The last half of 1940 was an uncertain time for the Belgians, because they had no functioning national leaders. King Leopold III was popular for his gallant campaign and decision to remain with his defeated army, but he provided no public solutions for the future in his silence as a prisoner. Behind the gates of Laeken Palace, however, he rejected suggestions from members of his court to create a quasi-collaborator government. Other possible national leaders from the top of the business class or nobility were attentistes, acquiescing in moderate collaboration with the winning side for the meantime. Wealthy conservatives were impressed by the military efficiency and anti-communist crusade (after 1941) of the Germans, and were also influenced by the king's pro-Axis sister. Although the top of Belgian civilian society provided little active opposition, at least Leopold was probably a moderating influence on the German occupation, similar to the Danish king.

⁶⁷ FO 898/230, 9, 15-6. Close advisors such as Henri de Man (Socialist party leader), Baron Capelle (Private Secretary) and his sister Marie-José (Crown Princess of Italy) suggested that the king appoint a government to sign an armistice with Germany. FO 371/30783: C4313 (MOI interviews to FO, 20 Apr 42).

⁶⁸ FO 898/230: 10, /234: 112.

⁶⁹ Both the Danish king and government remained under German rule in an uneasy coexistence until two years of worsening relations led to a full German takeover in 1944. Collaborators helped to impose a harsh rule in the Netherlands and Norway, whose governments and monarchs fled to London in 1940. Roger Keyes, *Outrageous Fortune*:

For the last half of 1940, Belgian leaders outside the country were not able to offer much hope of national redemption, either. The exiled Pierlot government drifted in disgrace and confusion until October 1940, so it is not surprising that Belgian popular resolve to actively resist the Germans did not stiffen until the Battle of Britain in the autumn of 1940 proved that the Germans were not invincible.⁷⁰

The only lights of resistance inside Belgium to brighten the gloom of national defeat during the difficult first year of German occupation were spontaneous underground newspapers. La Libre Belgique was the largest (up to 60,000 copies) and most famous of these publications; it started being printed on 1 July 1940, and eventually reached 60,000 copies an issue. Like some of the other 500 newspapers that were eventually created in occupied Belgium, it had a reputation and an experienced staff inherited from the First World War. Many of these publications mixed political and anti-German commentary with news from Allied sources; facts to counter the half-truths and hypocrisy of the Germans was what Belgians wanted. 71

King Leopold III was in a difficult position as a monarch under house arrest, striving hard to avoid being compromised by either the Germans or the exiled government. Early attempts to help his nation by private personal appeals to the Germans accomplished little, and created widespread misunderstanding of his motives. The king met Hitler secretly in Germany on 19 November 1940 with the help of his sister, Crown Princess Marie-José of Italy, but the talks did not achieve the goals of guaranteed Belgian national integrity and

the Tragedy of Leopold III of the Belgians 1901-1941 (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984), 152, 213; Mercer, Chronicle, 75, 349, 392, 439.

The odyssey of the Pierlot government from Belgium through Britain is discussed in Chapter I. 29 Belgians flew with the RAF during the Battle, as noted in Chapter II.

⁷¹ One of the most famous actions of the Belgian underground press was the substitution and open sale of a counterfeit issue of *Le Soir* in Brussels on 9 Nov 43. Henri Michel, *The Shadow War:* Resistance in Europe 1939-45, trans. Richard Barry (London: André Deutsch, 1972) (original, 1970), 95; Fernand Demany, "La presse clandestine en Belgique," *ERM*, 164; FO 898/470: 277.

release of POWs.72

An even bigger blow to the king's great popularity within
Belgium was his marriage to a commoner, Marie Lilian de Baels, in
September 1941. De Baels was the governess for Leopold's three
children by his late wife, and got the title of Princesse de Réthy
after marrying him. Her Flemish origin became another Walloon
complaint against the king, especially since it went against the
royal tradition of marrying a foreigner to avoid offending one of the
Belgian factions. The marriage also ruined his image as a lonely and
unselfish prisoner suffering for the nation. By 1943, many Belgians
and the government-in-exile felt that King Leopold III had been
swayed by reputed anti-Allied members of the royal court. From then
on, the political inactivity of the king and his refusal to establish
a dialogue with London created continually stronger opposition to his
staying on the throne after liberation.⁷³

On the other hand, the government was relieved that most civil servants counterbalanced the lack of credible opposition at the top of official Belgian society. Lower-level officials, with the approval or acquiescence of most of the secretaries-general, usually did their best to passively hinder the German occupation authorities and their collaborators. The secretary-general was the top civil servant in most national government ministries, and was usually a passive Allied supporter. However, the momentum of collaboration under the protective force of the Germans was difficult to stop, especially since Secretary-General Romsée of the Interior Ministry was the worst traitor. This ministry helped the Germans to replace nearly 3,000 burgomasters or aldermen with collaborators from the

⁷² Conway, *Collaboration*, 26. Hitler respected Leopold enough not to replace him with a Nazi *Gauleiter* until June 1944, and even called the king a "sly and cunning fox." Hugh Trevor-Roper, ed., *Hitler's Table Talk 1941-1944* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953), 344, 630.

 $^{^{73}}$ Mallinson, Belgium, 119, 228-9; FO 371/34310: C3408 (Bowker to Roberts, 18 Mar 43); Stengers, $L\'{e}opold$ III, 171. Another factor against the popularity of Leopold's new marriage was the widespread devotion to the memory of his late wife, Queen Astrid, who died in a car accident in 1935 while Leopold was driving. BI, 9 Sep 43.

Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (VNV) (Flemish ultra-nationalist) or Rexist (Walloon fascist) organisations. There was little that the king or Pierlot could do about this contamination of government inside Belgium, but a few prominent acts of defiance helped to keep alive a national pride that would not let the Germans remain unchallenged. For example, François van de Meulebroeck, burgomaster of Brussels, rejected dismissal in June 1941, as did most of the faculty at the University of Brussels six months later. Joseph van Roey, Primate of Belgium and Cardinal of Malines, often criticised German conduct and acquiesced in pro-Allied activity by local priests.⁷⁴

Better treatment of the more "Germanic" Dutch-speaking Flemings by the Germans brought neither massive collaboration in Flanders nor greater divisions between Flemings and French-speaking Walloons. The largest collaborator groups remained a small minority within Belgium. Collaborators were so despised that at least a third of the unmarried ones were rejected by their own families, and there were many divorces. Recruiting for the Walloon and Flemish Legions on the Eastern Front became even more difficult after long casualty lists, as well as stories of German disdain and maltreatment, filtered back to Belgium starting in 1942. 40,000 Belgian men joined various types of German-controlled units willingly or under pressure. This was a substantial number of uniformed collaborators, but was less than the number of similar Dutch traitors and only one-third of the total in the Belgian Resistance.

VNV and Rex officials predominated in Flanders and Wallonia

⁷⁴ Agencies dominated by the Interior Ministry included police and local governments. FO 371/30783: C4313 (MOI interviews to FO, 20 Apr 42); Mallinson, Belgium, 120; Lukacs, European War, 215-6, 461.

⁷⁵ Over half of these collaborators were Flemish, who were allowed to become an elite SS unit two years before the Walloons. George Stein, The Waffen SS: Hitler's Elite Guard at War 1939-45 (Ithaca, USA: Cornell University Press, 1966), 140, 154-55; Conway, Collaboration, 109, 220-1; David Littlejohn, Foreign Legions of the Third Reich, vol.2 (San Jose, USA: R.J. Bender, 1981), 55, 84, 108.

⁷⁶ Hasquin, *Dictionnaire*, 407. Other West Europeans in the better-trained and more heavily-armed German *Schutzstaffel* units included 50,000 Dutch and 20,000 French. Stein, *SS*, 139. More on the Resistance is included later in this chapter and in Chapter VI.

respectively after May 1941. Administrative positions on the national level, however, were usually given to the Flemings by the Germans. While German favouritism bothered the Rexists, rivalry between the VNV and Rex for German favour was of little interest to the Belgian public; most concerned themselves with how best to handle arrogant and corrupt authorities of all backgrounds. Collaborators lived an isolated and insecure existence. Despised by the public and reviled by the Allies, even the Germans were sometimes uncomfortable with them and encouraged rivalry to maintain control. 78

Exile government fears about a collaborator government taking their place during the discouraging two-year period after their unpopular flight to Britain proved to be unnecessary, as short-term German interests and strong Rex-VNV rivalry precluded such action. The king's passive resistance and an unreceptive attitude by almost all Belgians held the national fabric together against corruption by the Germans and collaborators.⁷⁹

During 1942, pro-Allied activities and sentiment greatly increased. Causes of this change included Allied victories in Russia and North Africa, forced labour deportation to Germany and improved coordination among the British, Belgian exiles and the Resistance. Sabotage, espionage and escape lines became more potent anti-German activities, and involvement with them gave the exile government more credibility.

Forced deportation of Belgian labour to Germany was the greatest single impetus to active Belgian national resistance, because it tore apart a great number of families while confronting them with the brutality of occupation by a totalitarian power. A German military decree on 7 October 1942 stated that men aged 18 to

⁷⁷ Conway, Collaboration, 200-1, 249; Littlejohn, Legions, 9, 87.

 $^{^{78}}$ FO 898/57: 15, 93; FO 371/38875: C112 (Belgian Broadcast, 3 Mar 44).

⁷⁹ An example of polite, but firm, resistance was shown by the story of the little Belgian girl who was given candy by a German officer. After accepting the gift, she responded, "Thank you, you dirty *Boche!*" *News* 2 (1942): 52.

50 and single women aged 21 to 35 were liable for conscription to work in German war industries. 305,000 réfractaires went into hiding in Belgium by November 1943, but 400,000 more were unable to avoid deportation. 10 Large and well-organised networks were developed to hide and support compulsory labour evaders in Belgium, France and Holland. Resistance became more necessary and more common. Public condemnations of forced labour and deportations by the Church and the Supreme Court in Belgium, as well as by the exile government, increased the respectability of anti-German activities. 11 As a result of national anger and improved underground organisation, thousands of young male labour evaders were recruited into Resistance units, refuge networks created for réfractaires could also save more Jews, and Rex and the VNV lost many party members. 12

The time was ripe for the Belgian underground and the exile government to resolve their differences. An aroused nation, angry about deportations and increased German brutality, was also more likely to support active resistance against the losers of El Alamein (November 1942) and Stalingrad (January 1943). It was an opportune time to end the political suspicion, personality conflicts and overlapping activities that had hampered coordination among the British, the Belgian underground groups and the Pierlot government from 1940 to 1943.

The core of what would become the Armée Secrète in 1944 was established in late 1940 as the Légion Belge by former Army officers. Both the British and the Pierlot government felt at first that it was a reactionary right-wing group that would cause trouble after national liberation. SOE was convinced by a British agent in mid-

⁸⁰ Deportations started in neighbouring France and Holland within a few months, helping to produce between six and seven million forced labourers (including POWs) in Germany by the autumn of 1943. FO 898/97 (Resistance Diary No. 31, 7 Jun 44); RIIA, Occupied, 18-19.

⁸¹ Michel, Shadow War, 160, 198, 283; FO 371/30780: C10983
(Oliphant to FO, 10 Nov 42), /30783: C6757 (Oliphant to FO, 4 Jul
42); FO 898/97 (Resistance Diary No.6, 24 May 43).

⁸² FO 898/238: 142; Michel, Shadow, 202, 283.

1942 that the *Légion* was politically neutral enough to support.

Charles Claser, one of the top leaders of the *Légion*, came to London in July 1942 for special training without the concurrence of the Belgian government. Pierlot, who still mistrusted all underground groups, angrily broke relations with SOE for three months.⁸³

By autumn 1942, Belgian government leadership changes and British pressure created better support and communications in London and Belgium to establish more effective links with the Resistance. Pierlot had handed the duties of the Minister of Justice to a man who had recently escaped from Brussels. Anthoine Delfosse, the member of Pierlot's cabinet who had been unable to escape from Belgium in 1940, arrived in London with invaluable knowledge of occupied Belgium and the Resistance. His credibility was good on both sides of the English Channel, and eased the formal creation of joint activities between the civilian agents of the Sûreté d'État and the SOE. Pierlot's resumption of primary duties in the Ministry of National Defence in October ensured that Belgian military intelligence (2e Direction) would get the strong supervision necessary to curb its bickering with the civilian intelligence agencies. An Anglo-Belgian accord on 24 November 1942 set up joint management of civilian agents by the SOE and the Sûreté, with each having one communication link to Belgium. 2e Direction was to continue its exclusive ties with the British SIS (Secret Intelligence Service, or MI6), but would start cooperating with SOE in supply and coordination efforts. Both Belgian military and civilian intelligence services worked with SOE concerning sabotage and subversion. For other actions, most of the civilian Resistance groups worked with the Sûreté and the SOE, while the predominately military Légion Belge was linked only to the 2e

⁸³ FO 898/68: 100; Ivan Gerard, "Aperçu sur la role de la Résistance militaire en Belgique," ERM, 359, 361; CREH, 2LC 1: 1-11. The Belgians and other exile groups also felt that SOE actions sometimes provoked needless German reprisals. Nigel West, Secret War: The Story of SOE (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992), 249.

Direction.84

Belgian military intelligence continued having some difficulty adjusting to the new and flexible arrangements with the aggressive and unorthodox SOE. However, 2e Direction did produce the excellent "Trojan Horse" pamphlet containing rules on administration and personnel for the Armée de Belgique. The creation of a High Commissioner of State Security in July 1943 finally brought both the Belgian military and civilian intelligence services under one direct supervisor. Working for the Minister of Justice, the new Auditeur Général, Walter Gaanshof van der Meersch, was able to solve support problems, such as how to finance secret military operations. He continued to have problems with the attitude of 2e Direction, however, so he was given the rank of lieutenant general in June 1944 to confirm his authority in a military hierarchy. 85

The insertion of over 200 British and Belgian secret agents into Belgium accelerated up to D-Day in mid-1944 as Anglo-Belgian cooperation improved. Aircraft for these important airdrops were hard to get because of competition from other missions, such as bombing, reconnaissance and airdrops to the Maquis in France. There had also been a relative decline in the importance of the Resistance in military plans and operations from the desperate and defiant days of 1940, when the SOE was created as a detonator for large anti-German revolts. The promise of massive American and Soviet armies fighting the German Wehrmacht caused even Churchill by late 1942 to scrap risky plans of small landings supported by large uprisings led

⁸⁴ CREH, 2LC 1: 5-10, 15-20, 42-7; West, Secret War, 102. The Legion Belge changed its name to Armée de Belgique during this period to avoid confusion with the new collaborator Legion Flandern and Legion Wallonie. Philip Johns, Within Two Cloaks: Missions with SIS and SOE (London: William Kimber, 1979), 142-3.

⁸⁵ SOE had paid all secret mission expenses until August 1942; salaries and equipment for Belgian agents were funded by Pierlot's Ministry of Justice starting in December 1942. CREH, 2LC 1, 25-30, 42-47, 60-70.

by secret armies as no longer necessary or attractive. 86

While underground groups were still useful in hindering German mobility, they were most valuable to Britain after 1942 as auxiliaries to the psychological warfare of the PWE, the sabotage of the SOE and the intelligence operations of the SIS. Intelligence information from the Resistance was most valuable in identifying national trends or in corroborating reports from SOE or SIS agents. Britain was the sole supporter of European Resistance movements from June 1940 to November 1942, when the Soviet Union and United States began helping in eastern and western (especially France) Europe respectively. After April 1944, the latter powers became dominant in most Resistance supply and joint actions. However, British links with the Resistance continued to be strong where their army dominated in northwestern Europe, including Belgium.⁸⁷

Arms and money from the Belgian exile government started going to the Armée de Belgique (AB) in 1943, after it had accepted the authority of Pierlot and the Allied high command, as well as promising to avoid political activity. An Anglo-Belgian plan of military action and the "Trojan Horse" rules of conduct reached the AB in August 1943 on the second attempt at delivery. This finally established a strong, disciplined underground partner with a known and acceptable set of rules that would mesh with the activities of British and Belgian agents in occupied Belgium. The political neutrality and military background of the AB leadership were additional factors that were especially appreciated by the Belgian exile government. SOE efforts were hampered by the political and operational diversity of the other underground groups it dealt with. Among the largest were the Mouvement National Belge (rightist

⁸⁶ Charles, Forces, 77-8; Stafford, Resistance, 66, 81, 153; AIR 41/84: 244-5. The costly raid on Dieppe in August 1942 reinforced the concept that only massive conventional invasion forces could overcome German defences. Mercer, Chronicle, 326.

⁸⁷ FO 898/230: 3; M.R.D. Foot, SOE: An Outline History of the Special Operations Executive 1940-46 (London: BBC, 1985), 152; Michel, Shadow War, 52-4.

professional and Catholic upper middle class) and Front de

1'Indépendance (communist-influenced working class); there were
nearly ten smaller groups.88

Communications between the exile government and its favourite Resistance group still needed improvement, however. Belgian liaison officers did not arrive at AB headquarters until the spring of 1944, and no permanent AB representative joined the council of ministers or Pierlot's office in London. By The chains of command were strong enough, however, to maintain sufficient coordinated sabotage and passive resistance to keep enemy troops on edge about possible revolts without provoking massive retaliation and reinforcements from Germany. On the other hand, if the German panzer divisions in reserve in the Rhine valley started moving to join tanks already defending the coasts of northwestern Europe from Allied invasion, the AB had the military mission of delaying them as much as possible. The neutral and disciplined 30,000 active and 40,000 reserve members of the AB would also be a useful force for stability in liberated Belgium when the exile government returned. So

Evaders and aircrew members shot down over Belgium also benefitted from the more effective support given to the Allies by the Belgian resistance. The Comet Line was the most famous of the escape networks that stretched from Belgium to Spain; it helped nearly 300 aircrew members and 450 other evaders reach freedom in Spain or behind Allied lines after D-Day. 2,700 more aircrew members were helped by the underground in other countries to return to Britain. The Belgian exile government funded a national financial assistance

⁸⁸ Johns, Two Cloaks, 162-4; Harry L. Coles & Albert K. Weinberg, Civil Affairs: Soldiers Become Governors (U.S. Army in World War II series) (Washington, D.C: Department of the Army, 1964), 803.

⁸⁹ This contrasted with the more unified French Resistance, which had British and French liaison officers, and frequent travel between France and London. Ugeux, "Psychologique," ERM, 363, 372. The Dutch Resistance was of limited use from 1941 to 1944, due to internal rivalry and German penetration. De Jong, "Government," Holland, 10.

⁹⁰ CREH, 2LC 1: 23-46; Gerard, "Aperçu, "ERM, 361-2; FO 898/230: 4.

program to help all evaders, providing up to 15 million Belgian francs a month. 17 agents were sent from Britain specifically to help the escape lines outwit the Germans and overcome chronic shortages of ammunition and money. 91

Escape line operations were complicated and dangerous, with deadly consequences for the civilians involved if they were caught by the Germans. Families in houses where evaders were found faced fines, imprisonment or death; all the men in one Belgian village were deported to Germany because a Canadian flier was found there. 92 After the second German penetration of the Comet Line in 1943, "conductors" were forced to quiz Allied aircrew on American or British trivia to confirm they were not enemy agents. German frustration with the high number of evaders could also affect other family members, as shown by threats to deport parents of the many students who escaped from transport enroute to Germany. 93

German and collaborator reprisals increased in scope and brutality as Resistance activity grew. The enemy also had some success in penetrating Resistance networks and escape lines, but the broken organisations and their captured members were usually replaced. Anti-collaboration edicts from London helped to lower the VNV and Rexist recruiting results, making them less useful to their German masters.

In late 1942, the Resistance assassinated the Rexist mayor of Charleroi. To halt the rising number of such attacks, the Germans took random hostages and, for the first time in Belgium, shot them.

⁹¹ Two Belgians were among the aircrew saved. Henri Michel, "Rapport General," *ERM*, 17; Cecile Jouan, *Comète: Histoire d'une ligne d'evasion* (St. Nicolas-Waes, Belgium: Editions du Beffroi, 1948), 5, 189-90. King Leopold III also funded the escape lines, using local tradesmen working in his palace as couriers. Gilberte Brunsdon-Lenaerts, Interview by author in London, 30 Aug 95.

⁹² Jouan, Comète, vi; Michel, Shadow, 352. Aircrew members themselves were challenges for escape line members. A very memorable experience for one of the latter was teaching a bow-legged Texan to walk like a European and to talk Flemish without a Western twang. Brunsdon-Lenaerts, Interview, 30 Aug 95.

⁹³ Brusselmans, Rendezvous 127, 75, 78, 82; J. Wullus-Rudiger, La Belgique et ses Alliés 1940-45 (Bruxelles: Charles Bulens, 1945), 24.

Prime Minister Pierlot's denunciation on 1 December of the reprisals was followed a few weeks later by details of his new decree-law clearly defining categories of collaboration and punishments. The increasing likelihood of death or dishonour for a losing foreign power made being a VNV or Rex official or member less attractive. For example, the German-appointed mayor of Liège resigned soon after taking office in late 1942, due to receiving several threatening letters and a noose in a package. 95

Nonetheless, collaborators continued to fight against the Allied cause in both Belgium and Russia. Over half of the *Gestapo* (German secret police) in Liège were reported to be Belgians, and a fake Resistance network based in Brussels was established in 1943 by a collaborator working for German counter-intelligence. Another German pretending to be a Belgian Resistance leader established a fake escape line that actually saved some evaders to keep its cover and the trust of SOE and 2e Direction. Damage caused by the penetration of Belgian underground networks was not nearly as severe as the havoc wrought by the German *Englandspiel* that decimated SOE and Resistance activities in the Netherlands during 1942-1943. The British were so shocked by that extensive breach of security and loss of secret agents that SOE suspended contact for months with field units in Belgium as well as the Netherlands.⁹⁶

In spite of enemy success against some underground units in 1943 and early 1944, as well as increased brutality against hostages, Belgian resistance continued to increase and to diversify, even

⁹⁴ FO 371/30780: C12119 (Oliphant to FO, 4 Dec 42), /C7129 (PWE No. 64 to BBC Belgian Service, 24-31 Dec 42); FO 898/232: 84.

 $^{^{95}}$ Conway, Collaboration, 220-1. FO 371/38878: C486 (LRC (Buisseret) to FO, 31 Dec 43).

⁹⁶ FO 371/38878: C486 (LRC (Buisseret) to FO, 31 Dec 43); Edward Cookridge, Inside SOE: The Story of Special Operations in Western Europe 1940-45 (London: Arthur Barker, 1966), 445-47, 472; Stafford, Resistance, 132.

including many courts and police units.97

The probability of an Allied invasion of northwestern Europe from Britain had greatly increased by early 1944, affecting the mood and preparations of both sides in Belgium. The number of German troops and Resistance members both increased, while King Leopold III and the Belgian exile government tried separately to gauge the mood and aspirations of the nation. It was a tense time, with impatient Belgians longing for liberation while still dominated by resentful enemies determined to give the Allies a hard fight.

German troop strength in Belgium had decreased to 30,000 in 1942 as the Wehrmacht focused on the Eastern Front. After successful region Allied landings in the Mediterranean during late 1942 and 1943, German occupation forces in Belgium rose to over 60,000 to counter another possible invasion from the west. The level of discipline and morale had fallen in the German Army, as shown by more problems with insubordination and drunkenness. The arrival of Eastern Front veterans for recuperation during occupation duties brought in men who had grown accustomed to brutality and harsh conditions, and who were therefore numb to efforts to improve morale or public relations. Collaborator military or police units who faced revenge in Belgium, or heavy fighting on the Eastern Front, showed similar signs of surliness. Having compromised both their honour and their homeland, the VNV and Rexist veterans were especially dangerous because they had nothing else to lose.98

Prime Minister Pierlot intensified his campaign to win over the Belgian people and King Leopold III, while the propaganda campaign mentioned in Part 3 above tended to make enemy morale even lower. Pierlot's National Day speech on 21 July 1943 had broadcast the message of inevitable Allied victory, a government in harmony with

 $^{^{97}}$ Resistance activity was increasing in the Netherlands and France at the same time. FO 898/97 (SOE-PWE Survey Part II, 1 Apr 43; Resistance Diaries 8, 18, 26, 33-5, June 1943-August 1944).

⁹⁸ News 3 (1943): 51; FO 898/68 (German morale in Belgium, 18 Jan
44); Gerald Reitlinger, The SS: Alibi of a Nation 1922-45 (Englewood
Cliffs, USA: Prentice-Hall, 1981) (original 1956), 155.

the monarchy under the constitution, and support for the king's return as the reigning head of state. After positive feedback from popular reaction in occupied Belgium, the same themes were expanded in a government letter to the king at the end of September. All seven ministers in London signed the document, which stated that Belgium was to continue the war as one of the Allies until all of the Axis nations were defeated. The king was to proclaim this policy after regaining his freedom, preferably after ridding his court of its many neutralist advisors. After giving an account of its exile activities to the reunited Belgian parliament, the government would resign to permit a broader cabinet to be formed. Public order and political actions would be governed by the constitution, without any of the authoritarian measures advocated by some of the king's advisors. After a slow and careful journey to Brussels, the letter was delivered personally to King Leopold III by Pierlot's brother-inlaw. Leopold's delayed response merely defended his own conduct and severely criticised the government. The king's rebuke did not reach Pierlot until after the liberation of Brussels, and was all the more disappointing to the premier because his brother-in-law had been shot by the Germans after he had seen Leopold.99

The king was not oblivious to popular opinion, however. His staff polled prominent Belgians in 1943 and 1944 on topics such as the future of the monarchy, postwar government and proper punishment of collaborators; the political bias of some of the participants limited the poll's credibility. Another fact noted by observers in Britain was that many underground papers strongly criticised the king, but much of the collaborator press supported him. 100

Concerned about the continuing silence of the king, the Belgian government sent another message by courier to Cardinal van Roey in December 1943, asking for the king's opinion on exile actions in

 $^{\,^{99}}$ Pierlot, "Pages," 19 Jul 47; FO 954/43: 8; Mallinson, Belgium, 128.

¹⁰⁰ FO 898/231: 20, /238: 202.

London and his plans for the administration of Belgium after liberation. Leopold's initial response was vague and aloof, but a short time later he pleased the cardinal by showing a more agreeable stance. Van Roey informed Pierlot of the king's new attitude. By this time, the premier and some of his ministers found it difficult to avoid continued doubts about the king, but they felt that national reconstruction would be served best by a show of unity with Leopold after their homeland was liberated.¹⁰¹

Part 5. Conclusion

The exiled government of Hubert Pierlot had worked hard from 1942 to 1944 to improve the lot of the Belgian people, even if it meant disagreements with their British hosts. The effect of the British blockade on vital Belgian food imports was the biggest irritation for the Belgian government. Nonetheless, the zeal and perseverance of the exiles created the largest food relief program within the blockade, and ensured adequate nutrition to prevent mass starvation and epidemics. Unfortunately, this achievement did not create lasting Belgian gratitude towards the exile government, particularly in left-wing political and Resistance groups. This attitude made postliberation problems for Pierlot and his ministers more difficult, which will be discussed in Chapter VI.

The split between King Leopold III and his government was almost an obsession for Pierlot and the exiles, but it had positive, as well as negative, effects. Personality and policy differences between the monarch and his prime minister made running Belgian affairs difficult before May 1940; wartime exile was unlikely to erase such problems, as the Dutch discovered in London. On the

 $^{^{101}}$ FO 954/44: 1. Leopold's stubbornness and authoritarian traits also worried the FO. FO 371/38868: C3086 (de Sausmarez to Scarlett, 4 Mar 44), /38872: C1279 (FO (Harrison & Roberts, 5 & 6 Feb 44).

¹⁰² RIIA, Occupied, 48-9; FO 371/32472: W11908 (Hall to Drogheda,
20 Aug 42), /38878: C12723 (Oliphant to FO, 24 Sep 44).

¹⁰³ De Jong, "Government," Holland, xvii, 7, 10; Erik Hazelhoff, Soldier of Orange (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1972), 92, 217.

other hand, a captive king allowed Pierlot and his ministers to pursue wartime goals with less interference, especially since Leopold remained neutral but publicly silent. Although national unity could have been helped by more royal support for anti-German activities, his protected position as a symbolic obstacle to German domination would probably have been compromised. The passive position taken by the king improved the probability of the exile government being able to dominate Belgian national leadership choices. This helped the Belgian government to make some gains in national popularity, from widespread contempt in June 1940 to acceptance and respect by many Belgians in mid-1944.¹⁰⁴ The largest and most famous of the underground newspapers, La Libre Belgique, summed up the situation very well in February 1944:

Germans... pretend to forget that we have a government of our own. It may be in exile, but it is hard at work. We have been told, by means of the radio, that the preparations are being made. When the German army leaves, the Allied Armies will be there to keep order.... 105

The Belgian government, working with the British, had reached out successfully to its occupied homeland, better preparing Belgium to receive the Allies and meet the new challenges that would come with liberation.

 $^{^{104}}$ Devos, Interview; FO 898/234: 114; FO 371/38868: C11234 (Oliphant to Eden, 25 Aug 44).

¹⁰⁵ FO 898/97 (Resistance Diary No. 23, 10 Feb 44).

Chapter V: Sharpening the Sword, 1941-1944

Between 1941 and 1943, the Allied armies in Britain began to restructure their organisation and improve their morale. The Belgian army reflected this trend as it improved its equipment, leaders and training ties with the British army. These improvements were possible in part because of the increased probability of Axis defeat after 1942, due to successful British and Soviet resistance (with American supplies) to continued German attacks, America's new status as a full belligerent in the war, and Anglo-American successes in North Africa.

The Allied air forces and navies continued a desperate struggle against the Axis air and sea threat, slowly building strength in spite of losses. These forces based in Britain continued to maintain high levels of morale and effectiveness as their numbers and successes increased. The many governments and military staffs in London were especially pleased that these Allied national units meshed well with the British command system.

By May 1944, the level of effectiveness and confidence of the Allied air, ground and naval forces based in Britain had improved significantly during the previous three years. The Belgians in particular were ready to help the British, Americans and Canadians take back their homeland from the Germans.

Part 1. Stronger Foundations for the Allied Forces

Agreements between the Belgian and British governments continued to evolve from earlier pacts as political or military needs dictated, becoming more formal as costs and consequences became more expensive and critical in terms of long-term plans. The British also refined their laws to help the exiled governments recruit more men for their armed forces participating in the Allied war effort. Compromises were necessary to protect Britain from a few undesirables among the Allied recruits, as well as to avoid unwise "poaching" by zealous army officers of maritime manpower or of citizens of Canada and the

United States. The Belgian government was often frustrated at the limits put on its recruiting activity by the British, but Whitehall needed to avoid harmful misunderstandings and inter-Allied jealousy by being careful with its policies and special favours.

The Anglo-Belgian agreement of September 1941 concerning the organisation and employment of the Belgian armed forces in the United Kingdom was modified by a new agreement on 4 June 1942, primarily at Belgian insistence. Changes included British consultation with the Belgian government on the use of Belgian troops, greater authority for the commander of the Force Publique brigade in British West Africa, British commitment to provide warships for Belgian sailors to man, and the concurrent signing of a French-text agreement. Other Allies were also negotiating or revising similar agreements for various national reasons during this time period. Most of the words were the same, but differences were inserted to cover items such as two-way ship loans between the British and Dutch navies, British billing of the Czechs for expenses and Greek use of lend-lease supplies.1

As military missions and capabilities became clearer in light of a probable Allied invasion of northwestern Europe within the near future, details on the armies in particular needed to be worked out due to the financial, logistical and training burdens of preparing so many soldiers for amphibious assault, combat and occupation. The Belgian army was small in numbers, but it was great in importance to the Belgian government. The Belgians were also part of the British defence team, and so they followed the pace and format of their host army. This was reflected in the formal table of personnel and equipment strength and organisation agreed to by the War Office and

¹ FO 371/32206: W2446 & W2831 (CAB, 18 & 25 Feb 42), /26340: C11374 (FO (Ward), 18 Oct 41); ADM 199/615: M7133 (FO & Dutch Foreign Ministry, 5 May 42), M7753 (Agreement, 4 Jun 42).

the Belgian Ministry of National Defence on 16 February 1943.² Later military agreements clarified Belgian Army financial and operational arrangements, particularly for the parachute element, and also established a separate Belgian Air Force Inspectorate-General as experts and liaisons between the Air Ministry and the Belgian Ministry of National Defence.³

As more military recruits were required for the expanding military forces in Britain, an increased need arose to ensure compliance and fairness for all Allied eligibles. Parliament therefore passed the Allied Powers (War Service) Act of 6 August 1942, which made any eligible person not in Allied military service within two months of the act, or within two months after reaching conscription age, liable for entry into the British forces. This act gave teeth to Allied conscription laws, while keeping British control of their ultimate enforcement. 4 The Belgians and five other exile governments had already accepted these terms, but the Czechoslovaks delayed implementation of the act for seven months while a compromise involving "their" Sudeten German refugees was worked out. The Czechs wanted to avoid mass defection of Sudeten Germans into separate non-Czech national units in the British forces. On the other hand, General de Gaulle's French National Committee was very upset that French nationals were not included under this important act (until August 1944), but Whitehall did not want to get entangled in the volatile political competition of France before the Normandy invasion

² WO 260/46: C12311 (Agreement, 16 Feb 43); this agreement cancelled previous arrangements dating back to March 1941.

³ FO 371/38884A: C9690 (Agreement of 20 Oct 43, 20 Jul 44), /42299: W4974 (Supplemental protocol, 30 Mar 44), /32238: W3007 (Ward to Ministry of Pensions, 17 Mar 42); FO 93/14: 142 (FO to BelgEmbGB, 1 Mar 44).

⁴ FO 371/32202: W11071 (Act, 6 Aug 42); Parker, Manpower, 150, 163, 346-347. Male conscription ages were as follows: British, 18-41 (later -51); Belgians overseas, 16-45. News 2 (1942): 53-6.

beachhead was secure there.5

The results of the above act were that some conscripts of Allied nationality were sent by the British into the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps. However, Frenchmen and Danes could join British forces directly, since they had no recognised government in London.⁶

The next British legislation to assist its Allied guests was
Defence Regulation 104A, issued on 16 December 1942. It was in
response to individual attempts to create disloyalty in some Allied
forces, which the exiles were legally powerless to stop or punish.
The new regulation put the Allied forces on an equal footing with the
British military concerning limited enforcement powers connected with
military duties, property and information. It did not, however, give
the Allies power to enforce their conscription laws. Attempts by
Belgium and other governments to court-martial recalcitrant recruits
were disallowed by the British.

Recruiting was another activity where the British had sometimes to overrule the exiled Allies. The Air Ministry and War Office wanted to prevent non-Allied males from coming to Britain as military recruits, due to inadequate security screening possibly overlooking spies or other undesirables. An incident involving the Belgian Embassy in Argentina recruiting 30 mixed nationalities in the winter of 1941 for service with Belgian forces in Britain fuelled their fears as a prime example of a potential security disaster. The Home Office gave visas to only two of them, based on their strong personal

⁵ FO 371/32202 (all 1942): W11071 (FO to Parliamentary Counsel's Office, 10 Aug), W11282 (FO (Ward), 17 Aug), W11608 (French National Committee to British Msn, 22 Aug) & (FO (Ward), 30 Aug), W13971 (FO to BritEmbCS, 20 Oct); Parker, Manpower, 347. Enforcing Gaullist recruitment might have alienated Communist Resistance groups, or have been seen as excessive interference by Anglophobic nationalists.

⁶ A. Pigott, Problems (London: WO, 1949), 43-4.

⁷ FO 371/36382: W2888 (FO to Aveling, 26 Feb 43), /36384: W11793
(FO (Stewart & Dean), 20 & 23 Aug 43), W17810 (Oliphant to FO, 22 Dec 43), /36388: W1245 (FO (S.R. & O 1942, No.2561) to Allied Embassies, 8 Feb 43).

and family ties to Belgium.8

The exiled Allies were eager to enlarge their military forces (and political clout) by recruiting as many men as reasonably possible. The Belgian philosophy of recruiting nationals overseas who were applicants for citizenship, had long-term residence or family connections in Belgium, or had a "particular sympathy" for the Belgian or Allied cause was understandable and common among these governments with limited sources of manpower. The last condition was disliked most by the British, but the Belgians refused to rescind the above guidelines; the latter claimed that the "sympathy" clause was necessary for Luxembourgers to join Belgian forces.

The Belgians were not the only ones guilty of claiming extraneous sympathisers; the Norwegians often tried to make liberal use of Swedes and Danes in their military and merchant marine. Being both fair and consistent was difficult in the confusion created by complex rules and differing nationalities. One frustrated Foreign Office staff member expressed wishful thinking as follows: "this endless dispute with the Belgians...has now reached the heights of absurdity....Can't we abandon our previous policy of sweet reasonableness, and follow the Free French precedent of giving the Belgians (or others) a limited number of "Jokers" in their pack...?"

Even when Belgian recruits were acceptable to the Home Office, it was not always easy to get them to Britain. Three Belgian volunteers in Stockholm were told in 1941 that they would have to go

 $^{^8}$ FO 123/555 (Oliphant to FO, 8 Dec 41), /559 (BritEmbB to MFA, 14 Aug & 10 Dec 42); FO 371/32232: W893 (Chairman of Allied Forces Committee, 9 Jan 42).

 $^{^{9}}$ FO 123/555 (MFA to Aveling & BritEmbB to FO (Ward), 17 & 18 Nov 41).

 $^{^{10}}$ FO 371/36379: W6595 (FO to BritEmbN, June 1943), W4250 (FO, 16 Mar 43), W5397 (FO to AIR, 16 Apr 43). The British had allowed the Free French a one-time exemption on individual close ties to France for up to 2000 men, to ease the latter's unique burden of trying to man overseas installations and replace unreliable Vichy forces.

to India first in order to get to London! The determination of the Belgian government to recruit them was shown when it paid for the trio's lengthy trip. Arrangements for recruits found in South America were nearly as expensive and complicated. Getting recruits into uniform on Allied territory did not guarantee entry to Britain, as the Belgians found out when ten Peruvians were sent home from initial training in Canada after being refused British visas. Even if they were residents of Canada or the United States, foreign volunteers were evaluated by British security units through the requirement to get Home Office visas and to be processed through the London Reception Centre upon arrival. 12

Other Allies had similar problems in finding recruits or in getting them to Britain. The Norwegians had success in the United States and Canada by reclaiming Norwegian refugees from their 1940 defeat, but the other Allies were disappointed. Like Britain, the United States and Canada would not enforce foreign (Allied) conscription laws. "Melting pot" attitudes in North America discouraged men from "looking backward" to their country of origin or ancestry, and ethnic Americans had strong incentives such as better pay and citizenship restrictions to join the American forces as individuals. Belgium and most of the other smaller Allies therefore had few recruiting sources until their homelands were liberated, so units such as their RAF squadrons stayed at the same approximate strength from 1941 through 1944.¹³

For the exile governments, their army was the largest and most

¹¹ AIR 2/8238 (Rpt 23 to CAB, Oct-Dec 1942). This was due to German control of the sea and air routes between Britain and Sweden, as well as mastery of central and southern Europe. The only links with British-controlled territory were tenuous ones through the Soviet Union (neutral at the time) which could handle a few people.

 $^{^{12}}$ FO 371/26340: C3185 (FO (Mackenzie), 1 Apr 41), /36379: C4250 (MFA to BritEmbB, 11 Mar 43), /36396: W13836 (Dominions Office to Canada House, 29 Sep 43) & (FO to HO, 12 Oct 43). This was also the procedure for alien civilians.

 $^{^{13}}$ FO 371/32255: W2986 (UK High Commissioner's Office (Canada) to Attlee, 10 Jun 42), W9286 (HQ 8746 of Canadian Ministry of Defence, n.d.); AIR 2/8238 (DAFL 9 to AIR, 21 Jun-20 Sep 44).

important military force at their disposal. Lacking enough new recruits, Allied leaders felt it necessary to transfer men from their maritime organisations into the ground forces. The transfer of 500 Norwegian sailors and whaling crew members to the army in the summer of 1941 brought the Allied admirals' simmering resentment to a boil; similar transfers of at least 250 French sailors and 30-50 each in the Belgian, Polish and Dutch contingents had already occurred. By the fall of 1941, the Admiralty and War Office were involved in the Allied feud. The British worked out a compromise that slowed down the armies' "poaching" by matching individual backgrounds more closely with military placements, but sailors who had already transferred stayed in the army. 14

The priority of the ground forces became even more clear when Parliament passed the National Service Act (No.2) a few months later, which allowed a man discharged from one service to be conscripted for another. The result of this was that many former RN and RAF members were forced to enter the army as its manpower needs grew more pressing with the approach of D-Day in 1944. Another result of this act was that women and older men could be conscripted for the first time into national service, releasing younger men for combat units.¹⁵

The establishment of Allied military units in Britain was an impressive achievement in light of the conflicting cultures and priorities involved, as well as the shortages of manpower and equipment. Examining the individual Belgian military services will provide greater insight into that achievement and the sacrifices that made it possible.

¹⁴ ADM 199/779: M15790 (Pound-Dill, 3 & 13 Oct 41).

¹⁵ Piggott, *Problems*, 21; Parker, *Manpower*, 113, 163, 286, 297. This enlarged the male age group for conscription from 18-41 to 18-51. Eligible women were liable for auxiliary services of the armed forces if they were single and aged 20-30.

Part 2. First to Strike Back: The Belgian Section of the RAF

The Belgians were among the last from the occupied countries of northwestern Europe to get their own national squadron in the Royal Air Force. This was due to the late arrival of Pierlot and his ministers in London, as well as their small number of aviators and mechanics. By 1941, however, their government, personnel strength and experience were strong enough to support the formation of a Belgian unit. Most of the Belgian aviators who had fought during and after the Battle of Britain in 1940 had survived, and their younger compatriots had finally completed flight and ground crew training. The combat veterans had moved up to command or instructor duties, and were capable of forming a unit cadre. Even though the Belgians were still the smallest Allied group in the RAF, their accomplishments and numbers justified the creation of a national flight in early 1941, followed by an entire squadron nine months later. 16

The first all-Belgian pilot flight was authorised in 609 (West Riding) Squadron on 11 February 1941, and the first Belgians arrived a few weeks later. Formed in Yorkshire in 1936, 609 combined an international mix of very good pilots with an equally good aircraft, the Spitfire. Concentrating Belgians here resulted from a chance meeting on a British train between an RAF officer (Michael Robinson) and five Belgian air force escapees enroute to the Belgian military depot at Tenby in July 1940. Impressed with those escapees, as he had been with the Belgian air force detachment that had helped him escape from France in June 1940, Squadron Leader Robinson requested Belgian pilots for his unit when he took command of 609 Squadron. After the first eight pilots showed up at Biggin Hill in early 1941,

 $^{^{16}}$ AIR 2/8238 (DAFL 9 to AIR, 21 Jun-20 Sep 44); Gerard, Battre, 37, 39.

¹⁷ Halley, Squadrons, 425. Among the many foreigners who started their RAF careers in 609 Squadron were the first three American "Eagle" volunteer pilots in April 1941. Leslie Hunt, Twenty-One Squadrons: The History of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force 1925-1957 (London: Garnstone, 1972), 205.

Belgians formed half of the unit's pilot strength until May 1945.18

The Belgians finally formed their own unit on 12 November 1941, when 350 Squadron was formed with over two dozen pilots and equipped with 18 Spitfires (including two spares). Along with the squadron code letters of "MN" and the RAF roundel, the aircraft displayed a small Belgian flag.¹⁹

The second and last Belgian fighter unit was 349 Squadron, which was formed on 10 November 1942 at Ikeja, Nigeria. The number of Belgian pilots from the Congo available from South African flying schools were fewer than expected, as was the flying and maintenance performance of the obsolescent Tomahawk. The reduced threat from Vichy colonial forces in West Africa allowed the transfer of the Force Publique brigade out of Nigeria in early 1943, making 349 Squadron's presence there even less necessary. The squadron was therefore reformed at Wittering, England on 5 June 1943.²⁰

The first commander of 349 Squadron in England was a Belgian, Squadron Leader Yvan du Monceau de Bergendael, a veteran of 609 Squadron. Although all the fliers were now Belgian, 70 percent of the maintenance personnel were British. This was not unusual for new units, as demand for experienced mechanics by industry and all three armed services far exceeded the resources of most exile

¹⁸ Frank Ziegler, The Story of 609 Squadron: Under the White Rose (London: MacDonald, 1971), 180; Hunt, 21 Squadrons, 205. Of the first 8 Belgian pilots in 609 Squadron, only 3 survived the war; among them was Yvan du Monceau de Bergendael, Belgium's top ace. Victor Houart, Lonely Warrior: The Journal of Battle of Britain Fighter Pilot Jean Offenberg, D.F.C. (London: Souvenir Press, 1956), 139.

¹⁹ Halley, Squadrons, 382; AIR 2/8238 (Rpt 26 to CAB, Jul-Sep 1943); Vern Haugland, The Eagles' War (NY: Tab Books, 1992), 3-4, 23. Displaying national insignia on the aircraft of Allied squadrons was standard in the RAF. Jerry Scutts, Spitfire in Action (Carrollton, Texas: Squadron/Signal, 1980), 29.

²⁰ AIR 2/8238 (Rpt 24 to CAB, Jan-Mar 1943); Halley, Squadrons, 381. By this time, the Section Belge of the RAF had been established (12 Feb 42). It was able to help the RAF with manning and maintaining the new squadron. Luc Lecleir, Forces armées belges: Emblèmes et citations des unités (Bruxelles: Service historique, 1971), 281.

contingents.²¹ Later on, more young Belgian men were brought into aircraft maintenance and other air force support jobs in spite of the tough English language requirements and the higher priority needs of the expanding Belgian ground forces. Even the British felt the manpower pinch, and the big RAF draw on Britain's technically-skilled and adventurous men created resentment among Army officers.²²

Nearly half of the Belgian air force flying and ground personnel in the RAF were concentrated during the next three years in three fighter squadrons (349, 350, 609), which supported air defence, bomber escort and ground attack missions. Most of the others were in flying units in Coastal, Bomber and Training Commands as aircrew or ground support members; a few were technical or staff officers.²³

The high stress on squadron members caused by aerial combat was increased by the disruption of frequent moves. Units moved to new stations when mission requirements or flying effectiveness changed after a few months of combat losses. A longer stay, particularly if relatively successful, was cause for celebration. Sometimes squadron festivities were overly boisterous, but they did relieve tension and increase esprit de corps; many memoirs recalled these events with great fondness decades later. Individual moves by Allied air force personnel were decided by their flying command, with concurrent notification to the Air Ministry (where the Allied forces liaison office was located). Assignment of more senior officers, such as squadron leaders to command positions, also involved their national military inspectorate, who evaluated moves in terms of usefulness for

 $^{^{21}}$ AIR 2/8238 (Rpt 25 to CAB, Apr-Jun 1943); AIR 27/1744 (349 Sqdn Book, 5 Jun 43). Even the American 4th Fighter Group relied on RAF ground crews for over six months after the three Eagle Squadrons transferred to the USAAF in late 1942. Haugland, <code>Eagles'</code> <code>War</code>, 101.

²² Ameye, Dans la R.A.F., 92-7; Sparrow, Morale, 22.

²³ Ameye, Dans la R.A.F., 108, 112-114, 128.

²⁴ Among the best writers about squadron life with the Belgians were R. Lallemant (*Rendezvous with Fate*), F. Ziegler (*The Story of 609 Squadron*) and M. Donnet (*Flight to Freedom*).

postwar duties.25

The Belgians in the best position (up to August 1944) to strike back at the Germans were the fighter pilots, so their exploits were praised in Belgian exile publications. Many Belgians were proud when 350 Squadron shot down seven German aircraft while providing air cover for the Dieppe raid on 19 August 1942, for which Prime Minister Pierlot presented eight Belgian pilots with the *Croix de Guerre*. This same squadron had provided escort just two days before to the historic first B-17 raid on Europe by the new American Eighth Air Force. An indicator of growing Belgian expertise and maturity was shown by 350 Squadron being led in these two important operations by its first Belgian commander, Squadron Leader D. Guillaume.²⁶

Fighter pilots were encouraged to be aggressive and dedicated, but patriotic bravado occasionally exceeded official guidelines. On 20 January 1943, Flight Lieutenant Jean de Selys de Longchamps of 609 Squadron made an exciting detour from his official task of attacking German targets in Flanders. He used his new Hawker Typhoon with deadly accuracy to make a strafing pass against Gestapo headquarters in Brussels. On his next pass over the centre of the city, he dropped large Belgian and British flags before making a low-level escape. On his way back to the coast, he dropped about 1000 small Belgian flags on several villages. He had been planning his unofficial raid for at least three weeks with the support of his squadron comrades. Fighter Command appreciated the audacity of the exploit, but could not allow individuals to enjoy spectacular deviations from mission orders without encouraging a disruptive trend of imitators. De Selys was therefore demoted one rank for violating his official mission. On the other hand, Fighter Command honoured his bravery and flying skill by awarding de Selys the Distinguished

 $^{^{25}}$ AIR 2/8159: 114B (AIR to Bomber Command, 4 Jul 42), 119A (AIR to Command HQs, 24 Jul 42).

²⁶ News, 3 (1943): 8; Michel Donnet, "The First of the Fortresses (B-17s)," Wings of War, ed. Laddie Lucas (NY: Macmillan, 1983), 214-5; Ameye, Dans la R.A.F., 59.

Flying Cross (DFC), thus seeking to balance the requirements of discipline with appropriate recognition for a daring act that raised 27

An example of a Belgian ground operation that helped the Allied air campaigns was Operation Beagle, which worked with the bomber formations that often crossed Belgium to hit German targets. This operation set up an underground net of Belgian weather forecasters dropped into Belgium by the RAF. By early 1943, four clandestine weather stations were transmitting up to seven reports a day on conditions along the main flight path into Germany. Such timely information as cloud coverage, wind direction and speed, temperatures and storms were invaluable to Bomber Command and Eighth Air Force planners, and the Operation Beagle network provided data continuously through the liberation of Belgium in late 1944. Its success helped to increase the militarisation of weather forecasting in the British and Allied forces. By early 1944, 16 more Belgian officers and enlisted men were working in RAF meteorology, and a half dozen more were to be trained and sent to the Belgian Congo.²⁸

Life for the Belgians and other airmen in the RAF of 1943 was a mix of tedious routine and deadly combat, but the survivors grew in number and personal skills. By this time, Belgians commanded five British fighter squadrons and the two Belgian ones; more Belgians commanded flying training squadrons. A Belgian ace, Daniel le Roy du Vivier, had been the first foreigner to command a British fighter squadron as early as January 1942.²⁹ Belgian success outside their two national squadrons was due to several factors: individual skill and achievement, insufficient command positions within Belgian units

 $^{^{27}}$ Hunt, 21 Squadrons, 210; AIR 27/2102 (609 Sqdn Book, 31 Dec 42), /2103 (Ibid., 20 Jan 43). Fighter Command could not ignore de Selys' action because of its fame, and also because the HQ had recently refused to allow the French and Americans to drop flags on Paris. Haugland, Eagles' War, 103-4, 107.

 $^{^{28}}$ Roger Malengreau, "Clandestine Courage," in Wings, ed. Lucas, 314-5; AIR 2/8238 (DAFL 7 to AIR, 21 Dec 43- 20 Mar 44).

²⁹ News, 2 (1942): 71-2; 4 (1944): 64; Ameye, Dans la R.A.F., 83.

and the wise RAF policy of allowing talented Allied personnel ample opportunity for promotion up to wing level. Promotion to Group Captain and above was rare, due to limited access to Most Secret documents and the short time the Allied officers were in the RAF.³⁰

One of the ways that aircrews released the tension of inactivity between flights was to indulge in a few innocent superstitions. One of the most common ones was the system of rituals centred on the squadron mascot. In 609 Squadron, "William de Goat" provided a psychological boost to many pilots, who saluted him for good luck before taking off on a mission. Many ground and air units had mascots to help form some familiar routines in spite of changing locations, or to fill the void left by leaving family pets at home or losing friends in combat. Fighter squadrons usually adopted small, streamlined dogs, while bomber units kept larger, heavier canines.³¹

Belgian squadron morale was cited as good to excellent by British defence reports. This was generally true of all Allied flying squadrons, although many of their days were filled with boredom or the death of comrades. A 349 Squadron entry for a 30 April 1944 bomber escort mission to France provides an example of stress without the glamour highlighted by the media: "Bombing was not good, navigation was pathetic and the fighter cover was in a foul mood. The month ended at Manston (an away base) where the boys slept in their underpants on a hard bed made of scratchy blankets." 33

Strengthened by more personnel and better equipment, the Belgian Section of the RAF was ready for an intense year of operations at the

³⁰ The RAF allowed acting promotions of Flight Lieutenant, Squadron Leader and Wing Commander to fill wartime vacancies. AIR 2/6041 (Promotion of Officers During War, 7 Sep 39); WO 219/2269 (Allied Forces HQ (Mediterranean) to SHAEF, 24 Jul 44).

³¹ Raymond Lallemant, *Rendezvous with Fate*, trans. Frank Ziegler (London: MacDonald, 1964), 69. "William de Goat" retired (1945) to a farm as an unofficial Air Commodore. Ziegler, 609 Squadron, 316. A British Guards unit also had a goat mascot. Polish AFA, *Destiny*, 177.

 $^{^{\}rm 32}$ AIR 2/8238 (Rpts 23-27 to CAB, Oct 1942-Dec 1943; DAFL 7-8 to AIR, 21 Dec 43-20 Jun 44).

³³ AIR 27/1744 (349 Sqdn. Book, 30 Apr 44).

beginning of 1944. Women were included by then, as at least a dozen Belgian females had joined the Womens Auxiliary Air Force as officers and other ranks. The year started out well with the 100th Belgian air victory occurring on 10 January. The event was even sweeter for the Belgians by its occurrence next to Brussels. Another triumph for the Belgians came on 18 February, when 609 Squadron Typhoons escorted 14 Mosquito bombers on a secret low-level raid against Amiens prison in France. The raiders' mission was to free key Resistance leaders 24 hours before their scheduled execution; they were partially successful, as 79 of the 136 Maquis prisoners escaped from the Germans through holes blasted in the walls.

In addition to active flying in various RAF commands, Belgian officers had also been assigned to RAF command headquarters, learning British staff organisation and procedures in preparation for running their own air force after the defeat of the Third Reich. One Norwegian and many Polish and Czech air force officers had also been doing similar duties. These officers and their Allied comrades had worked hard during their exile to learn new skills and ideas, and they were now eager to be part of the RAF formations that would provide air power to overcome German opposition to an invasion of northern France.

Part 3. A Revived Army Gains Strength

The Belgian Army was small, scattered, and demoralised after a frustrating first year in exile. In addition to internal political unrest and a slow rate of recruitment, the 1st Belgian Fusilier Battalion shared the fate of other armies in Britain by being underequipped. Battalion morale improved after it left Tenby for

³⁴ Musée de l'Air, Brussels; Gerard, Battre, 39. Pierlot added a unit Croix de Guerre to the Belgian air force flag on 3 February at a large ceremony to commemorate the 100 victories. Donnet, Flight, 91.

³⁵ Lallemant, *Rendezvous*, 190; Mercer, *Chronicle*, 491. This raid (Operation Jericho) was brought to life again in 1993 by a simulator ride with authentic film footage in London's Imperial War Museum.

 $^{^{36}}$ AIR 2/8238 (DAFL 8 to AIR, 21 Mar-20 Jun 44).

Carm#then in July 1941, because some of the troublemakers were left behind to be discharged.³⁷ However, it would take top leadership changes and improved equipment and training before the frustrated exiles would concentrate on German enemies rather than Belgian ones. Improvements would accelerate in the winter of 1942-1943, after the host British Army had been rejuvenated enough to train others, and when modern equipment supplies were adequate. A new confidence and effectiveness were created, as were new special forces. By mid-1944, the 1st Belgian Brigade Group would show marked improvement in military strength and political reliability from its humble beginnings in Tenby four years earlier.

In order to understand the slow progress of the Belgian Army during 1941 and 1942, one must look first at the British Army on which the Belgians depended for equipment, training and precedent. The British Army during 1940-1942 was a force that was low on equipment, prestige and morale, especially in Britain. Scarce equipment and some of the best troops had been diverted to the eastern Mediterranean and the Far East, due to threatening Axis advances. A series of defeats in these regions during 1941 and 1942 made British sacrifices even harder to bear. The low point of British Army self-confidence was in 1942, when two disastrous surrenders stunned even Winston Churchill. The loss of the strategic bastions (and men) at Singapore (130,000) in February and Tobruk (35,000) in June sent shock waves throughout the army, and were major setbacks for Britain's military operations and reputation.³⁸

The Home Forces in Britain continued to suffer from the prewar neglect that had left inadequate training cadre and facilities for

 $^{^{37}}$ FO 123/555 (Cameron to Carlisle, 13 Jun 41).

³⁸ Fraser, Shock, 84-8, 102-5, 138, 145-54, 211. One member of Parliament even suggested in July that some of the Allied exile generals familiar with German weapons and tactics should temporarily lead British troops in the field until the WO could train its own new generals. Churchill, War, 518, 565, 572.

the huge expansion of the army after the Dunkirk evacuation in 1940. Events during the next two years aggravated the Army's bad reputation for poor quarters, extended service overseas in difficult conditions, and low pay. Not only was British Army pay low compared to many civilian jobs, but it was much lower than that given to American or Dominion troops. Prompted by the morale implications of having so many "big spenders" from North America arriving soon in the UK, the British raised their military pay by 20 percent in August 1942.³⁹

Another handicap that had to be overcome was the shortage of good officers. One method used by the British Army in 1942 to solve its leadership problem was to retire over 2,000 officers; this also gave the War Office more credibility with the Allied armies when it urged them to purge their own ineffective leaders. Perhaps the most painful hardship suffered by all the Allied forces was the adultery of young and lonely wives who strayed after their husbands had been gone two or more years. It was not surprising that popular songs of the time had titles such as Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree with Anyone Else But Me and Somebody Else Is Taking My Place.⁴⁰

The Belgian Army in Britain had many of the same morale problems that the British did, but a harsh German occupation of their homeland and the often unknown fate of family and friends made the unhappiness more intense. Among the officers in particular, the sadness of being in exile was compounded by the unique influence of the Belgian royalists, who supported their king's preference for continued neutrality and a more authoritarian government. These ideas directly challenged the authority and pro-Allied actions of the Pierlot government, but they were difficult to eradicate until changes in the top leadership could be made in 1942. The ultra-conservative land

³⁹ Piggott, *Problems*, 2, 5, 16; Sparrow, *Morale*, 15. An American private received 3-4 times the pay of his British counterpart. Canada also paid its men more, but deductions for savings, etc. reduced spendable cash. Reynolds, *Relations*, 152-3.

⁴⁰ Paul Fussell, Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War ((Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 186. Sparrow, Morale, 8, 21; Powell, Faces, 136.

forces commander from 1941 to 1942, Lt Gen Raoul Daufresne de la Chevalerie, provided little opposition to royalist officers, who continued to reach Britain after making relatively easy escapes from Belgium. Belgian government ministers were unable to cleanse the army of these bad influences until later, because of more pressing political and colonial problems.⁴¹

Top military and political leaders were aware of the royalist problem in the army, however. When Lt Gen van Strijdonck left the 1st Fusilier Battalion in July 1941 to become the Inspector General, his farewell speech advised the troops to concentrate on the war rather than internal bickering. Three weeks later, Minister of National Defence Camille Gutt spoke to the battalion with the same theme of fighting the enemy instead of themselves. He singled out recent officer arrivals from Belgium who had authoritarian tendencies and tried to arrange things their own way. He concluded with the threat that continued agitation would result in arrests by the police.⁴²

Dissatisfaction continued to fester in the Belgian army to such an extent that eruptions began. By December 1941, conflicting rumours about the amount of Belgian participation in the fight against Germany, as well as inadequate medical care, led to a crescendo of complaints in the 1st Battalion at Carm#then.

Furthermore, the battalion commander was unhappy with the royalist predominance at the Great Malvern headquarters, and the artillery battery was becoming restless under a very unpopular commander. 43

Correction of this unhappy situation was delayed by the distraction of top Belgian political leaders by other matters. Prime Minister Pierlot was involved in economic and military events

⁴¹ Schepens, *De belgen*, 128. Chapter II discussed a similar struggle in the Belgian diplomatic corps between the royalist and the pro-Allied factions, won by the latter in early 1941.

⁴² Ibid., 130-2.

⁴³ Albert Durant, Eaton Square (Bruxelles: Le Sphinx, 1947), 107-12; Jean Piron, Souvenirs 1913-1945 (Bruxelles: Renaissance du Livre, 1969), 90-3.

concerning the Congo, while Defence and Finance Minister Gutt's poor health made him barely able to handle more pressing duties connected with conscription, loans and developing air and naval forces.

Belgian dissatisfaction was increased even more by a War Office publication on the Abyssinian campaign which barely mentioned the efforts and victories of the troops from the Belgian Congo. The British War and Foreign Offices felt that the Belgian Army was going from bad to worse, but they were not sure how to get the fractious and proud Belgians to cooperate under closer British military supervision.⁴⁴

Nothing less than the replacement of top defence leaders was required to overcome the problems that plagued the Belgian Army in Britain. Small contingents with limited replacements were reluctant to do this, but the Belgians felt they had to take drastic steps in the fall of 1942. General Daufresne was removed from command, which allowed stricter measures against royalist influences to be enforced. The appeal of King Leopold III to Belgian officers had also weakened by this time because of the monarch's unpopular marriage in September 1941. Within two months, the general officer position as land forces commander was replaced by two smaller commands led by majors. Similar realignments were occurring in the Dutch and Norwegian exile armies, as the smaller Allies began to mesh their forces more closely with the British. Having majors commanding in the field made them closer in rank and experience to their British contacts for administration and training. As A month later, the top civilian

⁴⁴ FO 371/30803: C9297 (WO to FO, 3 Oct 42), C10550 (FO (Spears), 5 Nov 42), C11676 (Belgian Ministry of Information to WO, 21 Nov 42). The WO added more text and photos to the 2nd edition of the pamphlet about the Force Publique in Abyssinia; see also my Chapter III.

⁴⁵ AIR 2/8238 (Rpt 23 to CAB, Oct-Dec 1942); FO 371/30785: C2176 (BritEmbB to FO, 27 Feb 42). Generals brought prestige and clout with the British, but Daufresne's royalist stance and open rancour towards Belgian parliamentarians made him expendable. FO 123/555 (Huysmans to Gutt, 3 Sep 41). Chapter IV discussed Leopold's marriage.

⁴⁶ The Dutch had weaker government ministers and a headstrong queen, so ineffective Dutch senior officers were retired much later. AIR 2/8238 (Rpts 23 & 26 to CAB, Oct-Dec 1942 & Jul-Sep 1943).

defence leadership changed. Henri Rolin was dismissed as
Undersecretary of State for Defence after an ineffective eight months
of trying to reform the army. Pierlot then took over the duties of
Minister of National Defence from the ailing Gutt.⁴⁷

The impact and benefits of these changes took a little time to reach the enlisted ranks of the smaller units, so one more disruption occurred after the reforms at the top. The incident happened at the detached independent artillery battery at Crickhowell, in southern Wales. After three sergeants had been arrested in London on 17 November 1942 for trying to present an ultimatum for several changes to Pierlot, 40 of their comrades at Crickhowell refused all but guard and kitchen duties for four days. The British press was also sent a copy of the ultimatum, which embarrassed Pierlot with its charges of army inactivity being caused by a continuing government policy of near-neutrality. A Belgian council of war later convicted 14 men for their actions, and sent all of them to prison. Even though the sentences were harsh and the British press was very critical, the government's actions did discourage any additional Belgian mutinies. The aftermath of the mutiny also tightened officer discipline, since the unpopular royalist commander of the artillery battery and his staff of incompetent junior officers were replaced. 48

The Belgian Army was ready at the end of 1942 for even greater progress. Improvements in its leadership had been matched by changes in field organisation. Group I (formerly 1st Battalion) at Carmethen was led by Major J. Piron, and Group II (formerly 2nd Battalion) at Leamington Spa was under Major M. Branders. Group I consisted of the main combat units (1st Fusilier Battalion, independent artillery battery and independent armoured car squadron). Group II consisted of the Belgian recruit and training depot, as well as the independent

 $^{^{47}}$ FO 371/30803: C8051 (BritEmbB to FO, 30 Jul 42), C11186 (Rolin to Churchill, 10 Nov 42); Schepens, De belgen, 134.

⁴⁸ Jacquemin, *Chemin*, 160-2; CREH, 3LC 1 (Leamington Spa 14, n.d.); Segers, *Donnez-nous*, 33-41. Among the officers affected by the mutiny was Gutt's son, François, who transferred to the British Army. A Belgian council of war was comparable to a British court-martial.

paratroop company. The depot was also used to keep politicallytroublesome officers away from troops in the field units and the headquarters in London.⁴⁹

Attaching smaller Allied units to British divisions had been encouraged by individual Anglo-Allied agreements in late 1941 and 1942, which had been followed by the initial three-week training period of small Free French forces with the 5th Canadian Armoured Division. The Belgians were the next Allied force to train using this method; their successful two-month attachment with the 49th Infantry Division in south Wales ended in December 1942. Dutch and Norwegian battalions used the same method starting in 1943; all of these contingents later had further training with their original host or with new divisions. Inspired by the success of the intense training program with the smaller Allies, British soldiers and airmen started several months of individual training exchanges in November 1943 with American counterparts. 1913

The Belgians also started receiving more individual training at a variety of British schools for infantry, armour, signals, artillery and finance. New equipment in 1942 meant improved effectiveness, as the armoured car squadron discovered with its 18 new Humber Mark IV scout cars; these performed very well on manoeuvres, and provided the Belgian battalion with vital firepower.⁵²

⁴⁹ AIR 2/8238 (Rpts 23-5 to CAB, Oct 1942-Sep 1943); FO 371/30803: C8890 (WO-MND, 20 Aug 42). Group III was created in Dec 1943 to train Belgian liaison officers for the Allied armies that would liberate Belgium. Henri de Pinchart, Historique des brigades de fusiliers 1-6: 1941-1945 (Bruxelles: H. de Pinchart, 1977), 2.

 $^{^{50}}$ AIR 2/8238 (Rpt 23 to CAB, Oct-Dec 1942). British military liaisons to help train the Belgians were created by the Anglo-Belgian agreements of 5 Sep 41 (see FO 371/26340: C11374) and 4 Jun 42 (see ADM 199/615: M7753).

⁵¹ Most of the British units that hosted Allied formations were Territorial Army infantry divisions, about half of which fought in northwestern Europe after D-Day. AIR 2/8238 (Rpts 23-27 to CAB, Oct 1942-Dec 1943); Fraser, Shock, 406-7; Reynolds, Relations, 188.

 $^{^{52}}$ Weber, Hommes, 42-52; Van Daele, "Autos," 53-63; CREH, 8E 3: 2. The armoured cars were often based near the 1st Fusilier Bn. This gave them the option of working with the Belgian infantry when they were not training with British armoured units. Roger Dewandre, Au galop de nos blindées (Louvain: Dieu-Brichart, 1981), 24-5.

The Group I transfer in early 1943 to new sites in East Anglia went smoothly due to improved morale and efficiency among all ranks, as a result of their successful training partnership with the 49th Infantry Division in Wales. The new location had great potential for improving the fighting effectiveness of the Belgian units, due to large nearby training areas and the opportunity for active coastal defence. The artillery, three batteries by now, was located with the infantry to improve supervision and morale. After a few weeks, Prime Minister Pierlot announced the consolidation of Belgian units around Lowestoft, Suffolk, as the formation of the 1st Belgian Brigade Group "Liberation." The armoured car squadron, which had been attached to the British 2nd Household Cavalry Regiment, brought its 19 armoured cars and 150 personnel to Beccles, 15 kilometres west of the main group. 53 The expanded brigade group included maintenance, services, medical, information and communications, and even had Luxembourgers manning one of the artillery batteries. Improved morale was noted by both the Belgians and the British. The latter felt that some officers were still too politically-minded, but were glad that these individuals were being posted to the Leamington Spa depot in staff jobs away from most of the troops.54

The morale of all Allied land forces at this time was at a higher level, even though the Belgians were not the only Allied contingent with officer problems. The Poles had occasional minor political difficulties as well, and all of the Allies had surplus officers in varying degrees. Using the successful attachment of 50 young Norwegian officers in 52nd Division as a precedent, other surplus Allied officers of suitable age and experience were attached for three-month periods with British units. 55

 $^{^{53}}$ AIR 2/8238 (Rpts 23-4 to CAB, Oct 1942-Mar 1943); Jacquemin, Chemin, 162-3; CREH, 8E 3: 2. The Belgians replaced the Czechoslovak Brigade in the Lowestoft area as the Allied training partner of the 54th Infantry Division. WO 166/10649 (54th Div, 10 & 26 Jan 43).

⁵⁴ Piron, *Souvenirs*, 103-104; AIR 2/8238 (Rpts 24-5 to CAB, Jan-Jun 1943); FO 371/34321: C10434 (WO to FO, 9 Aug 43).

 $^{^{55}}$ AIR 2/8238 (Rpts 24-5 to CAB, Jan-Jun 1943).

1943 saw a steady increase in strength and morale in the Belgian units around Lowestoft. Corporal Leon Maiersdorf brought the 1st Fusilier Battalion an improved level of rations and supplies through continued "good management"; the commander, now Lieutenant Colonel Piron, supported his young creative genius without asking too many questions. Lt Col Piron was kept busy countering negative rumours spread by headquarters royalists or recent arrivals from Belgium, and was successful in keeping good unit esprit de corps by meaningful training. Training exercises in the nearby Thetford training area improved morale and proficiency. In Exercise Tread in July 1943, the Belgians played the role of German invaders against the British 198th Infantry Brigade; it was one military action the Belgians did not mind losing! By the end of 1943, the Belgian Army in Britain had 323 officers and 2992 other ranks. This total was actually above its authorised strength, especially in officers. The latter was part of the officer morale problem, especially in the depot at Leamington Spa where idleness and politics were an unhealthy mix.56

Like the Belgian action of isolating problem soldiers at the depot, another policy taken by the British and most Allied land forces also had good and bad results in the ground forces. The Belgians joined other Allies in the creation of new units to allow an escape valve for the more aggressive soldiers, as well as provide the British-led forces with new capability to strike back at the Germans. The independent Belgian Paratroop Company of 144 men was established on 8 May 1942 under Captain Edouard Blondeel, and then attached to the British 6th Airborne Division for special training. A few months later, the Belgian Commando Troop of 75 men under Captain Georges Danloy was formed as part of No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando Group.⁵⁷

Other exiled Allies also had national troops in these special units, which attracted many of the best and brightest from the army.

⁵⁶ Piron, Souvenirs, 106; AIR 2/8238 (Rpt 27 to CAB, Oct-Dec 1943); WO 166/10649 (54th Div, 15-16 Jul 43).

 $^{^{57}}$ Charles, Forces, 75; WO 218/40 (No.10 (Inter-Allied) Commando Group, 28 Jul, 7 & 14 Aug 42).

Most British Army leaders felt that the commando and airborne units were an expensive use of manpower that killed a lot of the best talent in the army by sending them on dangerous missions. Many infantry soldiers also resented the relative glamour of these special units. However, many commandos or paratroopers had the same opinion as a War Office report in 1946, which stated that the Special Air Service (SAS) did not necessarily take most of the best men from the infantry. Instead, the SAS often took individualists, who excelled in small unconventional units rather than large orthodox ones.⁵⁸

Commandos of No. 4 Troop in No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando Group formed the first Belgian unit to leave Britain to fight the Germans. After a farewell visit from Prime Minister Pierlot, Lt Col Piron and other Belgian dignitaries, the seven officers and 77 other ranks boarded ship on 10 September 1943. They sailed from Liverpool to Algiers, arriving in North Africa on 22 September for two months of training and acclimatisation with Polish and Yugoslav commandos. The Belgian and Polish commandos reached Taranto, Italy on 1 December, and joined the British 78th Infantry Division on the front lines two weeks later. Along with British commandos in Italy, the new arrivals became part of the 2nd Special Services Brigade under Brigadier Thomas Churchill.⁵⁹

The small Belgian commando troop won favourable mention for distinguished service as the fighting continued in Italy in early 1944, but a desperate struggle just across the Adriatic Sea would cause them to move to Yugoslavia. The German occupation force there was increasing its efforts to crush the communist partisans led by Josip Broz Tito during three years of guerrilla warfare. After Tito had been squeezed into remote mountain regions and the islands off

⁵⁸ Sparrow, *Morale*, 22-3; James Ladd, *SAS Operations* (London: Robert Hale, 1986), 104. The SAS were basically airborne commandos. Mercer, *Chronicle*, 241.

⁵⁹ WO 218/56 (No.4 Troop, 10 Sept 43); CREH, 10E 3 (Journal de campagne, 22 Sep-22 Dec 43). The commandos changed their brigade titles from Special Services (S.S.) to Commando late in the war to avoid being confused with other units, such as SAS or the German SS.

the Dalmatian coast, his British advisor (Brigadier Fitzroy Maclean) decided to use the island of Vis as a stronghold to maintain Allied communication and supply lines with the partisans. By the end of February 1944, the Belgian commandos had joined a force of two thousand British commandos and Yugoslav partisans on Vis. They made raids on neighbouring islands and harassed coastal shipping until their recall to England three months later. 60

Meanwhile back in Britain, training and movements to prepare for the Allied invasion of France were in progress. The goal that the Belgian soldiers had been working toward was getting closer, and they were impatient. Moving from Lowestoft to the North Foreland area in Kent at the end of 1943 increased their eagerness, as they could see Cape Gris Nez in France from there. By the end of 1943, all the Belgian army units had been placed under the British 21st Army Group invasion force organisation, already composed of American, Canadian, Czechoslovak, Polish and Dutch units under General Montgomery. However, the British were hesitant about using the small and irreplaceable Belgian or Dutch units for the initial assault. A large number of casualties in either of these brigade groups would not only have great political and morale repercussions, but would also rob the Anglo-American-Canadian forces of invaluable liaisons when the Allies liberated the Low Countries.

Belgian forces were certainly a good mix of Flemings and Walloons for liaison purposes. However, most of them had spent time in fascist prisons in Spain, France, Germany or Belgium; their years of waiting and preparation justified activity more forceful than mere

⁶⁰ AIR 2/8238 (Rpt 27 to CAB, Oct-Dec 1943); Charles Messenger, The Commandos 1940-1946 (London: William Kimber, 1985), 332-4; Mercer, Chronicle, 204, 447.

⁶¹ Piron, Souvenirs, 111; FO 371/38884A: C5524 (Chiefs of Staff, 21 Apr 44); AIR 2/8238 (Rpt 26 to CAB, Jul-Sep 1943).

 $^{^{62}}$ FO 317/34311: C 1153 (Roberts to Carlisle, 7 Feb 43). London also used the nearly 25,000 Czech and Polish soldiers in Britain with care. Thomas, *Volunteers*, 5-9. They and the 2nd Polish Corps in Italy were a potential force for democracy in eastern Europe who might have counteracted similar national units with the Soviet forces.

liaison duties. They preferred a return to Belgium after getting satisfaction and credibility by beating the Germans, not as a show-piece rear element. A move north in the spring of 1944 to Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, concerned the Belgians, as most traffic in England was moving toward the south coast ports in preparation for D-Day. 63

Prime Minister Pierlot wanted Belgium to share in the political responsibility and military glory associated with the impending invasion of France, particularly if the rumours about the Allies landing in the Pas de Calais near the Belgian border were true. He therefore asked for the return of the combat-proven Belgian commandos to Britain for the invasion of France. The return was approved by the Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff, but with a different purpose in mind. The Belgians were to return to England as part of the decoy operation to convince the Germans that the invasion would take place north of the actual target of Normandy. The Belgian commandos returned to their home base at Eastbourne, Sussex on 3 June and began two weeks of leave on 6 June (D-Day). All but a handful of soldiers from the smaller Allied contingents would have to read about the D-Day landings in the newspaper.

The decoy operation to shift the Germans' attention away from Normandy to the Pas de Calais was called Operation Fortitude South. It would successfully deceive top enemy leaders into thinking that a larger attack would come to the northeast of the Normandy invasion, causing critical reserves to be held back from the defence against the D-Day amphibious assault on 6 June 1944.66 Military confidence

 $^{^{\}rm 63}$ CREH, 4E 3 (Volontaires Belges en Grande-Bretagne, n.d.); Piron, Souvenirs, 107, 113.

 $^{^{64}}$ FO 371/38884A: C5524 (Chiefs of Staff meeting, 21 Apr 44), C6024 (Chiefs of Staff to Washington, D.C., 4 May 44).

⁶⁵ WO 218/70 (No.10 Inter-Allied Commando, 3 & 6 Jun 44). No.1 Troop (French) went ashore on D-Day. DEFE 2/780 (Featherstone & Jones, 27 Apr & May 46).

⁶⁶ Michael Howard, British Intelligence in the Second World War, vol. 5: Strategic Deception (London: HMSO, 1990), 119-20, 124. Using bogus radio communications and reports from double agents, the fake 1st U.S. Army Group under Lt Gen George Patton was created for the Pas de Calais ruse. Secrecy kept German and most Allied personnel

and political prestige are not enhanced much by being on the sidelines while others successfully attack, however. Pierlot was disappointed by the exclusion of his best troops from the first stages of the Normandy assault. He emphasised that his soldiers needed to be "blooded" by combat before returning to Belgium, in order to hold the respect of the Belgian population in general and the Resistance in particular; Pierlot was not the only Allied exile leader worrying about this.⁶⁷

Part 4. Small, But Busy: Section Belge of the Royal Navy

In 1940 and 1941, some Admiralty leaders were willing to support separate Allied naval ships because they desperately wanted help in keeping open the vital sea lanes to their beleaguered island. Belgian fishing and merchant crews had escaped German capture in 1940, but during the next few years they lost many of their ships to German attacks or British contracts to use the ships for other duties with different crews. The proven reliability of Allied navies from Norway, the Netherlands and Poland gradually made the Admiralty less suspicious of foreigners, which helped the Belgians when their turn came to man their own national ships. The first Belgian sailors had joined the Royal Navy individually, but the trend to place Allied exiles from occupied Europe into national units had gained momentum over several months. Lower-level arrangements between the British and Belgian defence authorities had already set recent precedent in February 1941 by forming the Belgian flight in 609 Squadron and by rededicating the infantry unit at Tenby as the 1st Fusilier Battalion "Liberation" with a traditional flag. Even though it would only be a tiny naval service, the Belgian government in London reflected the Allied exile preference for national military units by finally

uncertain about the main invasion site in Normandy.

 $^{^{67}}$ WO 219/2270 (Macfie to Jimmy, 5 Jul 44); FO 371/38884A: C8636 (Oliphant to Eden, 26 Jun 44).

deciding to support Belgian warships in Britain.68

The Section Belge of the Royal Navy was established on 3 April 1941, but its "founder," Lt Victor Billet, had lost on the political front after winning on the military one. He had offended Prime Minister Pierlot with his strident and direct approaches to get a Belgian navy established in Britain, so he was not given a top position in the new naval section. 69

Commander F. Timmermans was made the senior officer of the Section Belge because of his energy, stability and determination. As head of the Section Belge, Commander Timmermans usually succeeded in getting the recruits he needed from the Belgian government. As an officer of only mid-level rank, however, he had little clout with Pierlot or with the admirals of the Allied navies. No other Belgian naval line officer reached this rank during the war, due to limited time in RN service. Almost all other Belgian officers started at the lowest rank (as had their RAF comrades), and accelerated temporary promotion to high rank through command positions was not available in the few small ships with Belgian crews. With merchant or fishing backgrounds rather than naval ones, Belgian officers were not competitive for command of British ships. They were also aware that they needed to maintain general civilian skills rather than specialised naval ones to continue their postwar careers. 70

Section Belge of the Royal Navy had established a small but respected place in British naval operations by late 1942 through

⁶⁸ ADM 199/615: M12454 (ADM (ACNS), 24 May 40), M15068 (ADM (DOD [H]), 8 Jun 40), /770: M15674 (2nd Sea Lord, 2 Oct 41). See chapters II and III about fishing and the merchant marine respectively. Since their airmen were scattered or still in training, the RAF Section Belge was not formed until Feb 1942. Lecleir, Emblèmes, 281, 311.

⁶⁹ Anrys, *Congé*, 89, 104. The disappointed Lt Billet transferred to the new RN landing craft fleet. Unfortunately, he was killed in a heavy landing craft during the raid on Dieppe on 18 August 1942. More information on his crusade for Belgian warships is in Chapter II.

 $^{^{70}}$ ADM 1/17298 (RNR Belgian officers 1941-1945, 3-4). The Section Belge was the only Allied contingent within the RN; France, Norway, Poland, Greece and the Netherlands had larger forces under command in their own navies. AIR 2/8238 (Rpt 24 to CAB, Jan-Mar 1943).

consistent hard work. Recruiting from Belgian fishermen and soldiers had decreased from the early days, but the merchant marine and volunteers from outside Britain increased their input. Enlisted numbers remained small throughout the war, reaching 250 by late 1941 and 378 by late 1944.71

Belgians were treated as equals with the British at RN training bases. After basic training at HMS Royal Arthur (Skegness), many seamen went to other RN training bases for specialty courses that could last as long as ten months. For the one in thirty men who qualified through proven experience and character, petty officer training at HMS Lochinvar (Port Edgar, Scotland) provided the path to increased rank. Imitating their comrades in the land and air forces, enlisted sailors wore the "Belgium" tab on the upper sleeve of their uniform. The sailors was a sequence of their uniform.

Belgian officer strength in the RN grew from 14 at the end of 1941 to 77 by October 1944. A valuable source of new officers was the group of 40 cadets from the Belgian training ship Mercator, which had been in port in British West Africa during the German conquest of the Low Countries and France. Belgian cadets at Dartmouth Naval College in 1941 entered the RNR after graduation, and therefore paid no training fees. However, the Belgian government paid all personal expenses, such as pay, as did the other Allies. The Norwegian and Free French navies also sent cadets through the Dartmouth Special Entry course; for example, in December 1941, there were 12 French and 14 Norwegian cadets with four Belgians. All four of the Belgians were doing very well, with one excelling as the top Special Entry cadet. Other training schools, such as the Reserve Officers Gunnery

 $^{^{71}}$ CREH 7E 3 (Order No. 90, 28 Feb 41); Charles, Forces, 67; Gerard, Battre, 49.

⁷² Anrys, Congé, 80-1; Gerard, Battre, 46-7.

 $^{^{73}}$ Charles, Forces, 67; Gerard, Battre, 49; ADM 1/17298 (Belgian RNR & RNVR officers 1941-1945, 3-4). Belgian officers with enough maritime experience or training entered the RN Reserve (RNR), while those with little of either asset entered the RN Volunteer Reserve.

Course, also had Belgians as top students.74

British naval crews tended to be different from their Belgian counterparts, due to the predominance of fishermen in the latter. They were good workers at sea, but often ended up drunk and in jail when in port. Discipline was more physical, since petty officers enforced regulations with their fists. Coders and signalers were considered an elite, and tended to stay apart from the less technical ex-fishermen. The former's nickname of the "Baron Party" by the latter reflected this division, which often ran along Walloon-Fleming lines (fishing ports were all in Flanders). Fortunately for the Section Belge, this enlisted sailor split did not seem to fester or expand into larger national differences like the royalist issue that caused so much trouble in the Belgian Army. Belgian naval personnel appear to have been relatively unaffected by the type of political tensions troubling the army, probably because they were kept busy instead of being concentrated and left idle in static locations.

Belgian sailors were mostly assigned to smaller ships with the mission of protecting convoys. Patrol boats and small minesweepers protected the coastal channels primarily against intrusion by small, fast E-boat raiders (armed motorboats with torpedoes and mines). Corvettes were the smallest anti-submarine vessel used to protect ocean convoys, working with larger destroyers to drive off groups of enemy submarines. Land-based aircraft, sometimes flown by Norwegian or Dutch crews, were also used when weather and flying range permitted. Other Allied exile navies also concentrated on missions using smaller warships, due to their limited available manpower and moderate prewar naval establishments.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Gerard, *Battre*, 47; ADM 1/11882 (ADM to Treasury, 6 Dec 41); ADM 199/615: M9124-5 (Primary Naval Liaison Officer to 1st Sea Lord, Jan-Jun 42).

⁷⁵ Anrys, *Congé*, 166-8.

⁷⁶ By December 1943, the Dutch and Norwegians manned a total of 19 corvettes, 56 minesweepers and 29 others (many of them patrol boats); manning these were over half their personnel. Dutch and French submarines and cruisers operated under close British control, usually away from convoys. AIR 2/8238 (Rpt 27 to CAB, Sep-Dec 1943).

The first concentration of Belgian sailors was on the old (1917) French trawler/submarine-chaser HMS Quentin Roosevelt in early 1941. After nine months of training, the combined French-Belgian crew started coastal patrols around Britain in January 1942. After the Section Belge was established in April 1941, Belgian sailors were placed on all-Belgian enlisted crews with a mix of Belgian and British officers. Both national ensigns were flown from these ships. Belgian officers were more spread out in the Royal Navy, since they were handled as normal Reserve officers.

The next ships boarded by Belgian crews were two new corvettes, HMS Godetia and Buttercup. Each ship had six officers and 80 other ranks, the biggest vessels run by the Section Belge. All of the Belgians were taken off the Quentin Roosevelt to man the corvettes. The ships had unfortunately been designed for crews half that size, but needed more men to operate new electronic equipment, such as radar, sonar and communications. More armament had also been added, so that the small ships now had vital anti-aircraft guns to go with the usual 102 mm and 47mm guns. The choice of weapons was completed by depth charge launchers for use against U-boats. The new ships were expected to do well, as the crews were a combination of veterans and trainees who were almost unanimous in getting praise for training keenness and quickness of learning. The first of the two ships was taken over by Belgian officers and crew on 12 February 1942, and the second ship was manned soon afterwards. Both were assigned to Western Approaches Command on 23 April 1942. Their final training was done at HMS Western Isles at Tobermory, Scotland, and thoroughly prepared them for the tough duty of convoy escort in the North Atlantic.78

Approximately half of the Section Belge sailors were on HMS

⁷⁷ Anrys, Congé, 114-23; ADM 208/11: 71; Charles, Forces, 66-7.
Crews of 25% French and 75% British or Dutch had been used in 1940
with moderate success. PREM 3/43 (Dickens to Churchill, 27 Jul 40).

⁷⁸ Charles, Forces, 78-9; ADM 199/799: M217 (Naval Assistant (Foreign) to 2nd Sea Lord to ADM, 5 Jan 42); Anrys, Congé, 130-52.

Godetia and Buttercup fighting the big threat to Allied shipping in the North Atlantic, the U-boat wolf packs. The corvettes formed a critical part of the protective warship screen in a typical convoy group that had merchant vessels in the middle of a formation of ships at least two miles across. Corvettes and other escorting warships, usually destroyers, were able to reduce the U-boat threat by sinking the enemy or driving them out of accurate torpedo range. Duty on corvettes was arduous, averaging 24 days a month at sea in weather that was often harsh.⁷⁹

In May 1942, HMS Buttercup and Godetia were both sent to the Caribbean Sea in Group B5 to help the United States Navy fight the growing U-boat threat there. Group B5 consisted of two destroyers, one frigate, five corvettes and one anti-submarine trawler. After having a very pleasant port call in Bermuda, the Belgian warships got busy escorting convoys. Some of them included Belgian vessels, such as the oil tanker Belgian Gulf in an August run between Key West and Trinidad. Protecting the first Trinidad to Mediterranean convoy (TM-1) from 28 December 1942 to 14 January 1943 proved to be much tougher. The small group of six oil tankers and five escorts was attacked several times by a pack of eleven U-boats, leaving only two tankers and four escorts to limp into Gibraltar. In between rescuing tanker crews, Godetia had hit back at its silent enemy by damaging U-134. The next brutal battle came with convoy SC-122 going from Canada to Britain in March 1943; eight ships were sunk by large packs of up to 36 U-boats. The Belgian corvettes seemed to be part of a losing battle, as the total Allied tonnage lost that month was a crippling 435,000 tons.80

Allied efforts by the spring of 1943 reversed the rising trend of their ships being sunk. The addition of aircraft from escort

⁷⁹ S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea 1939-1945*, vol. 2 (London: HMSO, 1956), 103; Mercer, *Chronicle*, 730-5. Starting with 56 submarines in Sep 1939, Germany produced 1,158 U-boats during the war. Convoys were vital to British survival, and the war at sea was fierce.

⁸⁰ Anrys, Congé, 157-63, 191, 235, 255.

carriers, as well as more use of longer-range bombers such as the Liberator with better radar and weapons, gave Allied escort groups a clear advantage over the U-boats for the first time. By July 1943, Allied losses were about half those of March. Complementing this hopeful trend was the greatly increased rate of U-boat sinkings. The next eleven months of convoy escort duties in the still-dangerous waters of the Atlantic and Mediterranean were strenuous for Godetia and Buttercup, but the Atlantic lifeline to Britain kept growing stronger as the U-boats were beaten back. 81

At the same time that the Belgian flag was raised on the two Flower class corvettes, former Belgian fishermen took over five small patrol boats: HMS Sheldon, Electra II, Phrontis, Raetea (all extrawlers), and Kernot. The last-named was formerly the P-16, Belgian Corps de Marine patroller; it was the only known Belgian naval vessel to escape to England. These five made short-range patrols in British home waters from home ports of Liverpool, Yarmouth and Stornoway, primarily against German E-boats and U-boats. Proposed They were very useful in protecting coastal convoys, and could even assist air-sea rescue operations.

The last major type of ship assigned to the Section Belge was the minesweeper. The first five Belgians arrived on MMS (Motor Minesweeper) 188 in May of 1942. Within two years, Belgians manned six ships of the 112th and 118th Minesweeper Flotillas, based in Harwich, Essex. Each ship had two officers and 18 other ranks. Minesweeper duty was preferred by some of the older sailors, who liked the "family feeling" of the little "Mickey Mouse" (MMS)

⁸¹ The Allies gained success in 1943 by launching more tonnage than was sunk, while destroying more U-boats than the Germans could replace. Churchill, *War*, 536, 677-80, 926-28. Breaking the German *Enigma* code, with Polish help, was also vital to Allied success in the N. Atlantic and elsewhere. Mercer, *Chronicle*, 225, 360, 432.

 $^{^{82}}$ Anrys, Congé, 124-7; ADM 208/14: 12-3, 22, 49, /20: 12, 21, 48-9, 84.

⁸³ Their small size and night operations did not always protect them; one patroller was even rammed and sunk by a German destroyer in July 1941. Mercer, *Chronicle*, 206.

flotilla (similar to the familiar role of being in a fishing fleet).

Crews were on good terms with local citizens, even learning each

others' swear words (for use against Nazis, of course!).84

Their mission of clearing sea lanes around the North Sea and the English Channel was tedious and sometimes dangerous, but it was important work to the coastal coal convoys and the big ships using the Thames to supply London. The sweeping was often done at night, initially to avoid aircraft attacks and later to minimise the time between sweeps and passage by convoys leaving nearby ports at dawn. The shipping channels that were used most often were routinely swept four times a day; the shallow channel outside of Harwich was one of these. The Belgian minesweepers in 1942 usually spent five days at sea before returning to Harwich for a day of rest and resupply. The workload eased a little with the addition of more minesweepers in 1943 and early 1944, among them the Belgian-manned MMS 43, 77, 187 and 193.85

Minesweepers were the most numerous type of ship provided by the Allies to the British war effort; French, Dutch and Norwegian minesweepers in British home waters totalled 54 ships by early 1943. The RN had over 800 minesweepers by this time, most of them converted trawlers. On 2 June 1943, the Nore Command, which supervised the Belgians at Harwich, noted that it had swept over 3,000 mines since 1939 from the sea approaches to East Anglia and the Thames. The experience gained from those earlier defensive operations, combined with greater numbers of improved ships and aircraft, enabled the British to significantly reduce the German threat of mines or attacks on coastal convoys by the end of 1943.86

The Belgians and the other small Allies helped to fill a vital

 $^{^{84}}$ Each MMS was armed with one 20mm cannon and four machine guns. Anrys, $Cong\acute{e},\ 268,\ 282,\ 291.$

⁸⁵ ADM 199/1034: MS034 & M7513 (CinC Nore to ADM, 11 Jan & 1 Jul 43), ADM 199/1454: 282; Anrys, Congé, 283-94.

⁸⁶ AIR 2/8238 (Rpt 24 to CAB, Jan-Mar 1943); Anrys, Congé, 291; Roskill, Sea, 386. Allied shipping losses worldwide were due to mines (20%), aircraft (15%), and submarines (65%). Mercer, Chronicle, 668.

need to protect the convoys coming into Britain. The small ships that they manned were consistent with their manpower resources and prewar naval experience, and allowed the British to put more effort into the larger ships and more sophisticated submarines necessary for offensive operations (and great power status). The small ships also provided useful work for sailors whom the Admiralty did not want to lose to the infantry. Earlier praise for Section Belge sailors as "smart and easily led" was justified by continued good results and morale in the three years leading up to D-day.⁸⁷

Part 5: Conclusion

The resurrection and coordination of several distinct foreign militaries in Britain during the Second World War was unprecedented in scope and success in modern times. Desperation and sensible compromise while facing a common enemy helped to create appropriate British laws and agreements with exile governments to cope with an influx of over 80,000 Allied soldiers, sailors and airmen.⁸⁸

The British achievement of hosting and organising such a varied and successful military effort was even more remarkable in light of what other major powers were doing with foreign nationals. The United States used the "melting pot" approach with immigrants by training a few battalions of foreigners together, but sending them individually to different army units after training. Race instead of nationality was used to form distinct American units. By The Soviet Union held about 200,000 Polish and Czech military personnel under harsh internment conditions until nearly a year after their former German allies invaded. Some of these men were forced into the Red Army between 1939 and 1941, while the majority joined national units

 $^{^{87}}$ Ready, Forgotten, 147; ADM 199/615: M15068 (ADM DOD(H), 8 Jun 40), /779: M15790 (Pound-Dill, 3 & 13 Oct 41), M15674 & M217 (NAF2SL to 2nd Sea Lord, 2 Oct 41 & 5 Jan 42).

 $^{^{88}}$ AIR 2/8238 (Rpt 27 to CAB, Sep-Dec 1943, DAFL 9 to AIR, 21 Jun -20 Sep 44); Thomas, $Volunteers,\ 8\text{-}24$ passim.

⁸⁹ The U.S. had one Filipino and two Japanese-American battle groups, and many segregated "Negro" units. Ready, Forgotten, 173.

under communist supervision starting in 1942. These ground and air forces on the Eastern Front faced heavy German opposition as they advanced to their homelands. The Germans were also not enthusiastic at first about national units of foreigners. However, manpower shortages and a successful experiment with a Finnish unit changed Hitler's mind. Between 1941 and 1943, many foreign collaborator units were formed in the SS. However, morale soured after continued high casualties, German abuse and broken promises. 191

The great effort and percentage of manpower put into their small forces by Belgium and the other exiled Allies indicated that they were of great political importance, even if their size made them much less important operationally. The Belgian exile forces provided only 4,500 men, compared to the 4,700,000 mustered by Britain in all three services.92 The 4,500 men in uniform represented 32 percent of Belgian males aged 16-65 in Britain, compared to a British level of 31 percent of men aged 18-51. Exemptions for Belgian men between 19 and 25 were extremely rare, and men between 25 and 35 were given individual exemptions only if needed for British reserved civilian occupations. Conscription of Belgian scientists and musicians caused protests in the United States and Britain, but others in Whitehall were favourably impressed. The War Office in particular did not want to interfere, noting in mid-1941 that "of all the Allies, the Belgians have in the last six months made the greatest efforts to bring their small contingent in England up to strength, ... "93 The Belgian military in Britain was much smaller than the biggest three

⁹⁰ Among the forces that overshadowed units of their compatriots in Britain by 1945 were the ground and air forces from Czechoslovakia (35,000) and Poland (215,000). Thomas, *Volunteers*, 4-11.

 $^{^{\}rm 91}$ Stein, SS, 137-9,148-58. See my Chapter IV concerning the Belgians in the SS.

⁹² Charles, Forces, 68; Central Statistical Office, Statistical Digest of the War (London: HMSO, 1975), 8.

⁹³ Schepens, De belgen, 102-3; Parker, Manpower, 483-4; FO 371/26340: C264 (Gutt to International Labour Office, 26 Dec 40), C5352 (BritEmbUS to FO, 19 Apr 41), C5863 (FO to British Embassies, 7 Jun 41), C8133 (BritEmbB (Aveling), 18 Jul 41). The Poles, Czechs and French also conscripted scientists, usually for their air forces.

exiled contingents from Poland, France and Czechoslovakia, but was close in size to the forces of Norway and the Netherlands. 94

Differences in the size of their forces contributed to different military perspectives between Britain and the exiled Allies on the use of units in combat. The well-intentioned War Office concern that the smallest Allied contingents "were trying to do too much with too little, in that they will have no reinforcements" was resented as overprotective, 95 so a compromise was reached after D-Day that would conserve units and save national honour. Another problem for the exiles was lack of advance knowledge or participation in planning military operations, because they had almost no access to Most Secret information. 96 This was less of a problem for a small force such as the Belgians than for the much larger Polish forces, which became more significant in Mediterranean operations after Australian and Indian troops withdrew in 1942 to fight the Japanese. The Poles also constituted six percent of the 21st Army Group, which was the British-led ground force in northwestern Europe in 1944 and 1945.⁹⁷

The British government achieved important military and political results during the five years that it hosted, supplied and guided the Allied military forces based in Britain. Polish and French forces were large enough to make a tactical military difference, while the other exile forces were more important for their political impact. Each of these forces represented a great national investment in free

⁹⁴ Thomas, Volunteers, 4-34 passim. The Belgian, Norwegian and Dutch exiles each fielded a troop of commandos and an independent brigade. The Belgians had the most soldiers of the three contingents.

⁹⁵ AIR 2/8238 (Rpt 23 to CAB, Oct-Dec 1942).

 $^{^{96}}$ ADM 199/296 (WO M.I/Org/841, 21 Sep 43). Only British, Dominion, U.S. and Soviet military personnel could see the Most Secret strategic documents, such as those detailing invasions, conferences and capabilities.

⁹⁷ David French, *The British Way in Warfare 1688-2000* (London: Unwin and Hyman, 1990), 198, 205. The composition of the British Eighth Army changed from 27% British, 73% Imperial (Egypt, October 1941) to 36% British, 45% Imperial, 18% Polish (Italy, August 1944).

men and hope for the future of their respective countries. The benefit received by Churchill from the exiles was not only their support for the war effort, but also the priority claim to American assistance as the champion of freedom in Europe. This softened the British image of a self-serving imperialist power, and gave Churchill more credibility when he supported the Atlantic Charter and the United Nations Declaration that evolved from it. 98

During the long period of preparation for its return to Europe, the exiled Belgian army had progressed from a small group hampered by politics and defensive orientation to a more united and mobile force. The 1st Belgian Brigade Group was trained and proven in a process that ended in July 1944 with hearty British approval to join the fighting in Normandy. 99 The Belgian air and naval forces of 1944 were confident and competent combat veterans, larger and better than they had been in 1940. Political declarations and blows from the air and sea had been made; in the late summer of 1944, it was finally the turn of the main Belgian Army to strike back.

War

 $^{^{98}}$ Butler, Strategy, 2: 263; Churchill, $^{\bigvee}$ 507. The U.S. and Britain proclaimed the Charter (14 Aug 41). 22 nations signed the Declaration (1 Jan 42) to pledge full and united support against the enemy.

⁹⁹ Jacquemin, Chemin, 168; Piron, Souvenirs, 114.

Chapter VI: Liberation and Recovery, 1944-1945

Winston Churchill's preparations for the impending invasion of France were interrupted on 1 June 1944 by a meeting with Hubert Pierlot and Paul-Henri Spaak, who insisted on personally discussing their concern about Belgian casualties from increased Allied bombing of German defences and transportation systems in northwest Europe. The British Prime Minister's assurances about Allied efforts to limit civilian deaths and confine attacks only to essential targets would have been less comforting to the Belgian ministers had they known how much their host still resented the policies and actions of Belgium's leaders from 1936 to 1940. Furthermore, Churchill was preoccupied with the activities and potential publicity from the huge British involvement in the D-Day invasion. Effective attacks would lessen casualties, and vigorous propaganda would improve British prestige and status as a major power; taking time to mollify the fussy Belgians just before the critical landings in Normandy must have been very irritating for Churchill.1

Military members of the smaller Allied forces were kept on the fringes of D-Day activities as much as their civilian leaders were. Anglo-American-Canadian commanders ensured that their associates from occupied Europe in the joint D-Day organisation had no access to key SHAEF operational plans, and smaller Allied military missions did not join SHAEF headquarters until after operations on the European continent had begun. A ban imposed on visitors to coastal areas in southern England generally excluded Allied exile military or diplomatic personnel from mid-April to August 1944, and foreign travel or use of ciphers in radio or telegraph communications was also banned during most of that period. However, British waivers for

¹ Martin Gilbert, Road to Victory: Winston Churchill 1941-1945 (London: W. Heinemann, 1986), 781-2; Ready, Forgotten, 277. Allied warnings by radio and leaflet were given to civilians near critical points and specific targets on transport networks. Dwight Eisenhower, Crusade in Europe (London: W. Heinemann, 1948), 255, 265.

individual visits or coded messages were possible for the exiles.2

These tough measures made normal international diplomatic and financial activity very difficult, and some groups such as the Belgian fishermen had to vacate the marshalling areas along England's south coast. The tight security of Operation Overlord was made much easier by total British control of German agents in Britain.

Deception concerning Allied intentions on D-Day was done with the help of Belgian double agents, who helped to keep the Germans focused on the Pas de Calais area near the Belgian border.

The Belgians, like the other exiles, would have liked a more active role in planning and implementing D-Day. Their Allied "big brothers" kept tight control over the initial landings and consolidation of the Normandy beachhead for two months before the first major exile units landed. As the Allied armies moved rapidly closer to Belgium in late August 1944, the political objectives of the exiles became much more important, as they had in France when the liberation of Paris was imminent. The Piron Brigade was rushed by Montgomery from its minor coastal combat operations to the main spearhead of the British 21st Army Group in order to join the liberation of Brussels.

The liberation of most of their homeland in the first week of September 1944 allowed joyous Belgian celebrations during a short pause before the struggle against the Germans and the results of a harsh occupation continued into 1945. A shortage of supplies led to political bickering and widespread discontent, making the job of meeting both Belgian civilian and Allied expectations very difficult. A new government led by Pierlot (his fifth and final one as premier) had some success in catering to the needs of both groups, but it fell

The greatest extent of the coastal visitors ban was from Cornwall to the Firth of Forth, and its longest period was from 1 Apr to 25 Aug 44 from the Wash to Southampton. WO 219/2269 (COSSAC to ETOUSA & 21 AG commanders, Oct 1943); Hinsley, Counterintelligence, 254-8; Howard, Deception, 124-5.

³ British trawlers joined the Belgians in moving north to fish or to start contract work for the Admiralty. *BI*, 5 Oct 44. Piron, *Souvenirs*, 113. Masterman, *Double-Cross*, 118, 159, 168.

when popular disillusionment in February 1945 caused the Premier's coalition partners to resign. Analysis of Belgian events after the fall of Pierlot and all but one of his exile ministers will be less detailed, as the cycle of the discrediting and redemption of the Belgian government in exile was complete when Pierlot left office.

Part 1. From the Beach to Brussels

Of the 156,000 men who landed on Normandy's beaches and drop zones in the initial D-Day assault, only a few were from the Allied exile land forces. A small French commando unit under Commandant P. Kiefer landed on Sword Beach on 6 June to be scouts and interpreters for the British forces. The most significant action on D-Day by an exile leader was General de Gaulle's broadcast to France appealing for help when requested by the Allies. The Fighting French leader visited Normandy on 14 June at Churchill's invitation, followed on 1 August by the French 2nd Armoured Division. This unit was the first major force from the exiled Allies to land in Normandy. 4 Polish, Belgian and Dutch units followed within a week. While the French division moved eastward toward Paris with the American 12th Army Group, the other exiled Allies fought with the British along the coast of Normandy. The mid-August collapse of the German armies around Normandy opened up the way for rapid Allied advances to the east and northeast; the latter thrust liberated most of Belgium during the first week of September 1944. Belgium welcomed the Allied troops with the greatest enthusiasm yet seen by the liberating forces. Freedom was especially sweet for those Belgians who had fought the Germans in the Resistance or alongside the British.⁵ It is the latter group of exiles who will be highlighted in this section.

⁴ Mercer, Chronicle, 523, 529-31; Martin Evans, D-Day and the Battle of Normandy (Andover, UK: Pitkin, 1994), 12; Churchill, War, 786.

⁵ Mercer, Chronicle, 554, 560; Churchill, War, 845.

Although frustrated Belgian soldiers had to wait nearly two months before joining the fighting in France, Belgian airmen and sailors were active against German defenders from D-Day onwards. 350 and 349 Squadron provided cover over the invasion beaches, and the latter was one of the first RAF units to be based in Normandy. 609 Squadron complemented the Allied tanks and artillery by intense attacks against German infantry and panzer units with Typhoon aircraft. The small Allies sent about 3% of the total Allied air sorties (13,700) and warships (1,200) on D-Day.

The Belgian corvettes, *Godetia* and *Buttercup*, protected smaller ships and landing craft near the beaches. Although the Belgian minesweepers did not participate in D-Day operations, they were kept busy by the increased workload of keeping the English Channel clear for shipping bringing supplies to Allied troops fighting in northwest Europe.⁸

While the small Belgian air, naval and paratrooper forces were fighting on the new Allied front in France, other small groups of Belgians in the Resistance were preparing for the arrival of the liberation armies in their homeland. Destruction of power lines and trains by the Resistance had helped to deceive the Germans into thinking that the Pas de Calais region was the primary Allied target for invasion. These actions had been requested on 8 June by coded message in a BBC broadcast as part of a campaign of controlled disruption of German operations.

The recently-consolidated Armée Secrète in Belgium was eager to

⁶ Charles, Forces, 69-70; Donnet, Flight, 93; Charles De Moulin, Mes oiseaux de feux (Paris: Julliard, 1982), 189-90, 335.

 $^{^{7}}$ Ready, Forgotten, 284-5; Mercer, Chronicle, 526-8; AIR 2/8238 (DAFL 8 to AIR, 21 Mar-20 Jun 44).

⁸ Anrys, Congé, 310-1, 329-30; ADM 199/1454 (Appendix XIII, 347). Cmdr G. Timmermans, senior Belgian officer in the RN, led 202 Landing Craft Flotilla to Normandy (6-28 Jun). Louis Leconte, Les ancêtres de notre force navale (Bruxelles: MDN, 1952), 472-3.

⁹ Patrick Howarth, Undercover: The Men and Women of Special Operations Executive (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 169; Wullus-Rudiger, Alliés, 28.

attack the Germans. However, it generally followed Belgian government advice to keep a low profile for the time being, since selective sabotage would help the Allies without provoking widespread German reprisals. British liaison officers, followed by Belgian ones, helped to realign the Armée Secrète for better coordination with Allied army spearheads. Reminders were given about premature actions or security lapses that would compromise Resistance organisations.¹⁰

Army units from the exiled Allies arrived in Normandy in the first week of August 1944 after the invasion bridgehead was secured. By this time, the level of German resistance, as well as the capability and role of the unique exile forces, was easier to determine. The 1st Belgian Brigade Group led by Colonel Jean Piron had shown acceptable skill in exercises Beverloo and Girth in July, but it needed more experience working with larger formations. It was therefore placed with the Dutch brigade in the relatively quiet coastal combat zone to get settled in after its arrival on 8 August. Five Liberty ships had carried 1650 Belgians with 500 vehicles to the artificial port of Arromanches. The brigade group had three companies of motorised infantry, an armoured reconnaissance squadron, and an artillery group. Additional specialised companies included engineer, signal, military police, medical, legal and other support officers and technicians.¹¹

This enlarged infantry battalion had a variety of combat and technical units attached to it to make it more independent and mobile, able to change larger British "sponsor" units more easily, and able to provide its own minor support services without the language and cultural difficulties inherent in dealing with other nationalities. Another useful feature of the larger and varied Belgian and Dutch units was their potential as a source of cadre to

 $^{^{\}rm 10}$ Johns, Cloaks, 149; News 4 (1944): 220; Brunsdon-Lenaerts, Interview.

 $^{^{11}}$ WO 171/175 (21 AG Diary (Appendix L), 26 & 29 Jul 44); Piron, Souvenirs, 127; De Pinchart, Fusiliers, 2, 4.

organise and train their postwar armies.

Attached to the 6th Airborne Division, the newcomers quickly settled down to fighting Germans; the British commander was especially pleased with Belgian mortar and artillery effectiveness during the battle for Salennelles from 13 to 17 August. The towns of Franceville, Branville and Deauville were liberated by the Belgians between 17 and 24 August during Operation Paddle; the armoured reconnaissance squadron even earned special praise from their British counterparts for operating as smoothly as a demonstration squadron. In eleven days, the Piron and Princess Irene (Dutch) Brigades helped the 6th Airborne Division to liberate over 20 miles of coastline from the mouth of the Orne River to the mouth of the Seine River. Having proven themselves in battle, they were attached to the British 49th Infantry Division on 28 August to help take the heavily-fortified port of Le Havre.

The honour of being the first Belgian soldiers to return to France in 1944 belonged to paratroopers of the SAS. These elite fighters had used hit-and-run tactics against the Wehrmacht at the mouth of the Seine in Operation Trueform starting on 31 July to probe the strength of enemy defences, and they also harassed the Germans with jeep patrols around Le Mans during August to help cover the southern flank of the American advance. The paratroopers were also the first Belgian soldiers to return to Belgium. Eight of them were parachuted into the French Ardennes in Operation Noah, in order to get information on roads crossing the border and on German troop movements. By the end of August, these men had met with the Armée Secrète inside Belgium to plan the disruption of German defensive moves against the advancing Allies. The RAF dropped hundreds of

 $^{^{12}}$ WO 171/175 (21 AG War Diary: 16 Aug 44); CREH, 8E 3: 7-20; Weber, $\it Hommes$, 73.

¹³ The 12,000 Germans in Le Havre did not surrender until 12 September. Mercer, *Chronicle*, 562; Weber, *Hommes*, 58-9, 81, 87, 99; Piron, *Souvenirs*, 130.

 $^{^{14}}$ WO 205/208 (Walch to Belchem, 25 Aug 44), /209 (21 AG Airborne HQ, 4 Sep 44).

containers of weapons and ammunition to give the Resistance the firepower needed for the expected struggle. 15

The Belgian commandos were frustrated by staying in Britain while the Independent Belgian Parachute Company, followed by the 1st Belgian Brigade Group, joined the fight against the Boche in France. The commandos were not as mobile away from the coast as the airborne Belgians in the SAS, and the pattern of fighting from July through October 1944 did not require much of their amphibious expertise. For both operational and morale reasons, however, the eager Belgians were sent to the Bay of Biscay on a reconnaissance mission. Several commandos landed on the island of Yeu during the night of 24-25 August in Operation Rumford to get information about German defences in the area of the important naval base and port at St. Nazaire. 16

Fortunately, most of Belgium was liberated in September with much less fighting than anticipated. Most of the elite German panzer and SS units had regrouped in the Rheims area to block the eastward American thrust toward Germany. The Anglo-Canadian front moving northeast was less of a threat to Germany itself, so most of the Wehrmacht units between that front and Brussels were demoralised remnants of German infantry divisions shattered in Normandy. Once the Somme River defensive line was breached by the Allies, the next natural barrier was the canal system near the Belgo-Dutch border. The Allies were also fortunate to have total air superiority and the ability to overtake the fleeing Germans fast enough to prevent destruction of the main escape roads.¹⁷

21st Army Group seized the opportunity on 2 September to liberate Belgium by ordering the Guards and 11th Armoured Divisions

¹⁵ WO 218/203 (McLeod to Independent Belgian Parachute Company, 12 Aug 44); CREH, 2LC 1: 81, 92.

¹⁶ WO 218/70 (Laycock (No. 10 Inter-Allied Commando), n.d.); Segers, Donnez-vous, 119.

 $^{^{17}}$ WO 171/376 (Guards Armoured Div. Summaries Nos. 53-4, 31 Aug-1 Sep 44), /456 (11 Armoured Div. Diary, 1 Sep 44). German POWs said that Allied troops were not expected at the Franco-Belgian border for another three days. R. Trefusis, "The Liberation of Brussels: A Personal Account," <code>Despatches</code> (November 1994), 22.

to leap northward to Brussels and Antwerp respectively. The Belgian Brigade Group was ordered to join the Guards' spearhead as soon as possible, which it did the next day near Arras after a hectic dash across northern France. Piron and his men knew that their presence in the Allied vanguard was more for political reasons than for military necessity, but they did not mind. Crossing the Belgian border at Rongy in the afternoon of 3 September 1944 was a special moment for Piron and his men, for it meant that they were really going home after an exile of over four years. 18

In the mid-afternoon of 4 September, the brigade's infantry joined the Guards Armoured Division as they rode into Brussels in triumph with their vehicles covered in flowers. The Belgian Armoured Reconnaissance Squadron had already been busy in the city that day, escorting the XXX Corps Commander, Lt Gen Horrocks, to his meeting with the top remaining member of the Belgian royal family. Queen Elisabeth, widow of King Albert, was delighted to meet both General Horrocks and his Belgian liaison officers. The liberation of the city was a day that the citizens of Brussels and the Allied soldiers there would remember for the rest of their lives. Perhaps the joy of being free again was a little bittersweet for the queen and other older Belgians, as they remembered the faces of two generations that sacrificed their lives to liberate Brussels from the hated Boche in 1918 and again in 1944.19

Equally joyous welcomes awaited other Allied forces when they entered Belgian cities such as Namur and Charleroi (both on 5 September) and Ostend (8 September). Besides Americans and Canadians, the Allied armies liberating Belgium included motorised infantry in the Princess Irene Brigade from the Netherlands and the

¹⁸ WO 171/456 (11 Armoured Div. Diary, 2 Sep 44); Piron, Souvenirs, 140; De Pinchart, Fusiliers, 5.

¹⁹ Piron, Souvenirs, 140; Dewandre, Au galop, 137-9; Luc Schepens, Albert Ier et le gouvernement Broqueville 1914-1918 (Paris: Editions Duculot, 1983), 224. Being in Brussels may also have been a little bittersweet for a young Irish Guards officer, Prince Jean of Luxembourg; the US Army had not yet freed his home. Trefusis, "Liberation," 23.

1st Polish Armoured Division.²⁰ An infantry officer relished the chance to return in triumph to towns that had witnessed the British retreat to Dunkirk in 1940, and described typical reactions along the route of liberation as follows:

All along the route the Belgians lined the road, throwing flowers and fruit at the trucks and shouting 'Allo Tommi.' If anything, they were more demonstrative than the French had been....The chief impediment to progress in the famous old capital [Brussels] was the inhabitants themselves, who swarmed over everything and everybody....it made all the battalion had come through during five long years of war seem worthwhile...all ranks soon made friends with the Belgians, and enjoyed their generous hospitality....²¹

The capture of the port of Antwerp with its docks intact on 4 September was an especially happy event for the Allied commanders. The initiative and efficiency of local Belgian Resistance units made this significant achievement possible for the tired British vanguard, which lacked the information or strength by itself to prevent German demolition of key port and city facilities. The 11th Armoured Division arrived outside the city that day without large-scale area maps or information about German defences. The division had been sent into Belgium on extremely short notice, so it was also without Belgian liaison officers to facilitate contact with the Resistance. The use of Robert Vekemans, a former army officer, as a guide around German positions helped the advancing British tanks to capture vital bridges to the south of Antwerp and enter the city along the leastdefended route.²² Seizure of key points in the dock area by the Resistance had prevented German demolition of port facilities and the master Kruisschans Sluice gate that controlled the water level in the port. The German garrison of 15,000 was thoroughly surprised by the rapid British penetration of their defences, and several thousand

²⁰ Gilbert, Victory, 934, 941; Thomas, Volunteers, 8, 17-8.

²¹ P.J. Lewis, 8th Battalion: The Durham Light Infantry, 1939-1945 (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK: Bealls, 1949), 275-6.

²² Belgium, September 1944: Proceedings of the Anglo-Belgian Symposium in London, 21-22 August 1984 (Brussels: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1985), 88-92, 97; J.L. Moulton, Battle for Antwerp (London: Ian Allan, 1978), 24-6; Patrick Delaforce, The Black Bull: From Normandy to the Baltic with the 11th Armoured Division (Phoenix Mill, UK: Alan Sutton, 1983), 129-31.

prisoners were taken. After the 11th Armoured Division moved east a few days later, the Belgian Resistance guarded the prisoners and protected the Antwerp area for nearly two weeks until relieved by a Canadian division. The preservation and retention of an intact port complex at Antwerp was probably the greatest single achievement of the Belgian Resistance in the last year of the war.²³

The British realised how fortunate they were in capturing Antwerp with its large port intact, but even this triumph continued the Allied trend of having difficulties making use of their coastal victories. Between 27 June and 18 September 1944, the Americans had taken the large French ports of Cherbourg, Marseilles and Brest after heavy fighting. Prior Allied attacks and German demolitions had ruined those port facilities to such an extent that it took months of repair to make them usable again for the heavy shipping required to support the Allied armies moving eastward to Germany. The problem that made Antwerp unusable to the Allies for over two months was the continued presence of German forces and mines along the Scheldt estuary that connected Antwerp to the North Sea. Field Marshal Montgomery's insistence on concentrating his forces for a combined airborne-armoured assault in mid-September at river crossings leading to Germany (Operation Market-Garden) resulted in a costly delay in clearing the shipping channel into Antwerp.24

Saving Antwerp was only part of the contribution of the Armée Secrète (AS) to the liberation of Belgium. The AS had been alerted by Belgian liaison officers sent from London to be ready to launch widespread attacks on German military units when the Allied front line moved within 50 kilometres of the Resistance forces concentrated

²³ WO 171/456 (11 Armoured Div. Diary, 4 Sep 44); Delaforce, Black Bull, 131; September 1944, 94-5. So many German prisoners were taken in a few days that many of them had to be caged at the zoo; some Belgians probably regretted that the lions and other meat-eaters were gone! Moulton, Antwerp, 29.

²⁴ Well-defended ports had cost too many lives in 1944 in proportion to their usefulness, so the Allies merely cordoned off German garrisons in St. Nazaire, Lorient and Dunkirk. After the Battle 48 (1985): 40-5; Eisenhower, Crusade, 333, 336; Mercer, Chronicle, 538, 558. Part 3 covers the battle for the Scheldt.

in safe areas. Until the Allies arrived, the AS was instructed to continue the successful rescues of downed Allied aircrew that had kept "escape lines" busy. The sabotage of Belgian roads and rail tracks that hampered German troop movements also needed to be maintained. Disruption of enemy transportation was so effective that General Eisenhower sent a letter of thanks on 12 July to General Jules Pire, leader of the Armée Secrète.²⁵

The great speed of the Allied advance pre-empted an uprising by nearly 35,000 active résistants, and also avoided the mass destruction and killing that were common in other German retreats. The emphasis of Belgian Resistance support to the Allied armies was changed quickly from harassment and sabotage of the enemy to clearing out isolated pockets of German resistance, guarding lines of communication, tracking down collaborators, and locating small enemy units.²⁶

It was a time to rejoice, but not to relax. General Eisenhower's broadcast to Belgium and Luxembourg on 5 September stated that their liberation had begun; both he and his listeners were quite aware that the Third Reich was not beaten yet. It was appropriate that the Belgian exhibit on the Resistance and the Piron Brigade displayed in central London in early September 1944 was titled "Belgium Fights On."

Part 2. Restoring Law and Order

Pierlot and his government ministers returned to Brussels a few days after it was liberated, grateful that the Germans were gone.

They also knew that many problems had been left behind, including a

²⁵ Sabotage lengthened rail travel time across Belgium from 9 hours to 5 days. P. Berten, "Belgian Resistance: An Account of Its Organization and Activity," *Message*, no. 45 (1945): 13-4; CREH, 2LC 1: 152; Brunsdon-Lenaerts, Interview.

²⁶ Ivan Gerard, "Aperçu sur le rôle de la résistance militaire en Belgique," *ERM*, 364-7; CREH, 2LC 1: 155.

²⁷ Times, 5 & 8 Sep 44.

continued enemy threat. Some Belgian officers continued to lead forces as part of the Allied effort to overcome stronger German defences, while others worked with the SHAEF mission and civil affairs detachments. One of the most prominent challenges for Belgian authorities was dealing with collaborators in a swift, fair and thorough process. A more delicate process was needed to handle Resistance members with differing political agendas and usefulness in continued battles with nearby German forces. Overcoming so many serious "people" problems simultaneously was an awesome challenge for the Belgian government ministers, but at least they were home again. Their future, however, still depended almost entirely on British military, political and economic support. It is for this reason that the five months after Belgium's liberation can be considered a modified extension of the Pierlot government's exile in Britain.

When Pierlot and his ministers arrived at the Brussels airport on 8 September 1944, no crowd awaited them because of confusion about their arrival time and place. The returning exiles felt a little more appreciated after a small crowd of 1,000 people gathered outside the Ministry of the Interior, their first stop in Brussels. Pierlot had tears in his eyes while he spoke to these supporters, and Spaak cheerfully shook all the hands he could. There was little public applause the next day when the ministers, all of them First World War veterans, placed a wreath on the tomb of the unknown soldier from the 1914-1918 conflict. This response seemed consistent with reports that the exile government was viewed in Belgium as being legal, but not inspirational.²⁸ All of the ministers were concerned about changes in Belgium during their four-year absence, and they did not know what kind of popular reaction to expect.²⁹

²⁸ FO 371/38896: C11971 (Aveling to FO, 9 Sep 44), /C12217 (Amies to Allen, 10 Sep 44), /38878: C486 (Buisseret interview to FO, 31 Dec 43), 17.

²⁹ Jan-Albert Goris, Strangers Should Not Whisper (NY: L.B. Fischer, 1945), 257. Perhaps many Belgians viewed the exiled ministers as "deserters;" such feelings had sparked active Belgian

The first requirements to revive a national government in Belgium were to reconvene Parliament, select a Regent, and form a new government. Pierlot had promised in his National Day (21 July) speech of 1943 that his government would resign after rendering an account of its actions in exile to a reunited Parliament in a liberated Brussels. A change of government would allow men with first-hand experience of the effect of the German occupation to deal more expertly with the needs and wishes of the Belgian people. With British help, Pierlot got the exiled parliamentarians back to Brussels to join their compatriots who had stayed in Belgium. On 19 September, Pierlot explained the actions of his government-in-exile, praised the British for their cordial hospitality, and lauded those Belgians who had served in the military, merchant marine and Resistance. The loudest cheers came when he mentioned England, Churchill and Canada, as well as when he noted the presence of the deputy from the canton of Eupen (annexed to Germany in 1940).30

The next order of business was to appoint a regent as head of state. King Leopold III had been abducted to Germany with his family in June 1944, so his popular brother, Prince Charles, was elected as the temporary regent by Parliament on 20 September. Having restored the legislature and the head of state according to the Constitution, Pierlot and his government turned in their promised resignations to the regent. Romain Moyersoen and Paul Tschoffen tried to form conservative and national unity governments respectively, but could not get enough parliamentary support. Furthermore, Gutt, whose financial skills and contacts were essential for any government to stabilise the Belgian economy, insisted on working with Pierlot only. Gutt and Prince Charles finally persuaded the tired and reluctant

resentment toward returnees in 1918. Henri Pirenne, La Belgique et la guerre mondiale (Paris: Universitaires de France, 1928), 282.

³⁰ The exile government had also extended the mandate of the Parliament elected in 1939 beyond its normal four-year limit until a new national election was possible; this was also done in 1916 & 1918. News 3 (1943): 308-9; WO 219/2271 (Erskine to SHAEF/G-3, 15 Sep 44); Desmond Hawkins, ed., War Report: D-Day to VE-Day (Original, 1946; Reprint, London: BBC, 1985), 180.

leader of four previous governments to be Prime Minister again.31

Pierlot formed a new government of national unity with 19 ministers from a wide political spectrum: Catholic (7), Liberal (3), Socialist (5), Communist (2), Resistance (1) and independent (1). His first speech to Parliament as the new Prime Minister was on 3 October 1944, and stressed that Belgium's first priority was to continue the war until the Axis was defeated. Other top priorities created a nearly impossible task of handling the following difficult challenges simultaneously: expand the Belgian army, provide supplies and logistical support to the Allied forces in or near Belgium, reconstruct the country physically and politically, and continue to work very closely with the British government. Pierlot's initial reluctance to take on so many problems connected with the war and the German occupation was understandable; once he resumed being Prime Minister, however, he did his best. In order to make necessary changes as efficiently as possible, Pierlot asked for, and received, increased authority from Parliament to use decree-laws for a limited time.32

Authority throughout Belgium during Pierlot's last government was shared in varying degrees with the Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF). During the initial period after liberation, de facto responsibility and authority would rest with the SHAEF commander, American General Dwight Eisenhower. The civilian government would take over complete national responsibility as soon as Eisenhower deemed that Allied military needs no longer needed prevailing priority over Belgian civilian requirements. During the "military phase" in Belgium, local authorities would take over as

³¹ Prince Charles was popular because of his army service in May 1940 and his open opposition to the Germans. After Leopold was taken away, he hid with the Resistance in the Ardennes until Brussels was liberated. FO 371/38873: C12598 (BelAmbGB to FO, 21 Sep 44); Wullus-Rudiger, Alliés, 27; FO 123/572: 57 (Morton to Harrison, 2 Oct 44).

 $^{^{\}rm 32}$ 7 Sep 39 decree-law powers were reinstated on 3 Oct, and expanded on 28 Nov 44. FO 123/572: 40, 44, 49 (BritAmbB to Eden, 27, 29 Sep, 4 Oct 44), /573: 105 (BritAmbB to Eden, 30 Nov 44). Seven of the new ministers had been exiles in London.

much responsibility as possible for civilian administrative and judicial actions. The necessary liaison system needed between the Belgian civilian and Anglo-American military authorities had been set up by agreements in London on 16 May 1944.³³

Civil affairs arrangements were part of a carefully-negotiated system of liaison and cooperation between Anglo-American authorities and the governments of occupied Europe. Civil affairs detachments throughout the country kept Allied-Belgian relations as smooth as possible at the local level, moving to wherever they were needed. An indication of their importance was the arrival of two XXX Corps CA detachments in Brussels and Antwerp only one day after the armoured vanguard in early September. The peak number of these small units was 57 in January 1945, after several more had been created to handle the aftermath of the Battle of the Ardennes. Their numbers decreased slowly until the SHAEF "military phase" was declared over in February, when most CA personnel moved to Germany.³⁴

Liaison was done by large military missions at the top of the civilian and military hierarchies in Belgium. The SHAEF Mission to the government of Belgium represented General Eisenhower and Allied military interests in dealing with the government of Pierlot and his successor. British Major General George Erskine was the chief, with an American colonel as his deputy and a total staff of 30. The main function of the SHAEF Mission (Belgium) was to be a channel of communication between SHAEF, which included other Allied military units as well as the headquarters, and the Belgian government.³⁵

 $^{^{\}rm 33}$ Coles, *Governors*, 800-1; FO 425/422: U4686 (Eden to Spaak, 16 May 44). The Anglo-Dutch civilian administration and jurisdiction agreement terms followed those agreed to by Eden and Spaak. FO 425/422: U4706 (Eden to Van Kleffens, 16 May 44).

³⁴ Coles, Governors, 819; Frank Donnison, Civil Affairs and Military Government: N.W. Europe 1944-1946 (London: HMSO, 1961), 22, 113. SHAEF CA detachmentss in France, the Low Countries & Germany totaled 219 at the end of 1944. FO 371/40381: Z112 & Z1479 (SHAEF/G5 to Combined Chiefs of Staff, 1 Jan & Summary No. 32, 20 Jan 45).

 $^{^{35}}$ FO 371/38868: C12917 (SHAEF to Erskine, 15 Sep 44), /38869: C12992 (SHAEF/G3 to Military HQs, 17 Sep 44).

On the Belgian side was a military mission of 50 personnel headed by Lieutenant General Victor van Strijdonck de Burkel, the respected former Inspector General of Belgian Land and Air Forces in Britain. His mission in Brussels linked the channel of communication from SHAEF Mission (Belgium) to the higher levels of the Belgian government. The three branches of the mission handled civil affairs, military liaison and military justice and security.36 The initial 85 liaison officers at army group, corps (British) and division (American) levels subordinate to the mission were given the task of obtaining military information from civilians, advising on local topography, and recruiting for the new Belgian army. Absorption of Armée Secrète liaison officers and the need for more civil affairs personnel to help victims of new German attacks more than doubled the size of Van Strijdonck's national organisation by January 1945.37 Besides dealing with the aftereffects of the German attack in the Ardennes mentioned above, the mission-liaison officer system was useful in assisting SHAEF and the Belgian government to resolve serious food shortages (see Part 4) and in overcoming the crisis of disarming elements of the Resistance led by the Communists.

The Resistance was seen as a mixed blessing by the Belgian government; useful when disrupting German occupiers, but not so useful as a politically-unstable armed group that could continue disruptions after liberation. Pierlot convinced the SHAEF staff before the Allies entered Belgium to get the Belgian Auditeur Général and his military justice staff into liberated towns as soon as possible, to ensure the return of balanced law and order instead of a power vacuum being filled by whomever had the most weapons and boldness. Although there were few instances of power being grabbed

³⁶ WO 202/645: 3A (Moniteur Belge, 28 Feb 44), 17 (Belgian MM-SHAEF meeting, 11 May 44); Amicale des officiers de la mission militaire belge [MMB] et du service de liaison militaire belge [SLMB], Livre d'or (Bruxelles: Conseil d'administration de l'amicale de la MMB et du SLMB, 1952), 4.

 $^{^{\}rm 37}$ WO 219/2269 (SHAEF/G5 to G3, 28 Oct 44), /2270 (Van Strijdonck to Grassett, 15 May 44); Amicale, Livre, 5.

by brash Resistance groups in the few weeks after liberation, the Pierlot government was concerned about how few weapons the official police had compared to former underground groups in case of trouble. Only 600 of the 18,000 Belgian police and gendarmes had weapons in mid-September 1944; these men were greatly outnumbered by left-wing résistants who wanted to keep their own weapons.³⁸

Concerned about possible disturbances in the rear of the Allied armies, Eisenhower sent a letter to all Belgian Resistance units on 2 October 1944. In it, he addressed both their past and future efforts for the Allied cause:

....[Officers and Men of the Resistance Groups] can be justly proud of having by their devoted heroism contributed so largely to the liberation of their beloved homeland. The rapidity of the advance of the Allied forces which has spared much of your country the horrors of war has been due in no small measure to your help....

....Fighting is therefore over for most of you as soldiers of Resistance Groups....if you are required by your government to continue the struggle as members of the regular Belgian Armed Forces, I shall be proud to have you once more under my command....those of [you] who are no longer engaged in fighting or on guard duties, etc., upon orders of Allied Commanders, can best assist the military effort by handing in their arms.... These arms are urgently needed for other purposes....³⁹

Most members of the moderate Armée Secrète complied, but over 20,000 in the Communist-led Front de l'Indépendance did not. The gravity of the situation was becoming more obvious to the Allies, who were trying to stay out of Belgian internal affairs, as long as military security was not threatened. SHAEF provided 7,500 weapons to the Belgian government for distribution to the police, and Eisenhower came to Brussels on 9 November to show his support for the Belgian government and war effort.⁴⁰

Communists in the government and in the Resistance became more vocal in their opposition to the break-up and disarmament of their former underground units during the second and third weeks of

³⁸ WO 171/82 (Pierlot-Biddle meeting, 30 Aug 44); FO 425/422 (BritEmbB to Eden, 21 Sep 44); Hasquin, *Dictionnaire*, 407.

³⁹ FO 123/577: 113 (Eisenhower to Belgian Resistance, 2 Oct 44).

⁴⁰ FO 123/577: 82 & 90 (Aveling to Eden, 10 & 4 Nov 44).

November. All three of the Communist and Resistance ministers in Pierlot's cabinet resigned on 16 November in protest against what they felt was unjust treatment of the Resistance by the government. On the same day, General Erskine told the disgruntled former ministers that the British Army would support the Belgian government in the growing crisis, with force if necessary. Three days later, the Front de l'Indépendance (FI) staged an unarmed protest parade in Brussels without incident. The problem of what to do with several thousand armed Resistance members in Brussels still remained, however. Another parade of over four thousand FI members on 25 November against Government policies became violent after some protesters tried to forcibly enter a safety zone around government When warning shots in the air did not stop the rowdy buildings. demonstrators, gendarmes fired into the crowd and wounded 34 of them. The casualties emphasised the dangerous consequences of escalating the crisis, which was already affecting the nation by polarising the press and setting leftist Walloons against conservative Flemings. 41

The continued staunch support for the government by General Erskine and the presence of four Allied armies in Belgium, combined with dwindling support for a violent national revolution, led to an easing of tension between leftist protesters and Belgian authorities. One indication of the improvement in the arms situation was the increased rate of weapons being turned in by the Resistance, rifles and small arms ammunition in particular. Although the Allies preferred to let Belgian authorities handle direct confrontations, such as the 25 November demonstration, it was obvious that SHAEF would do whatever was necessary to protect its supply port of Antwerp and the rear areas of the armies (Canadian, British and two American) facing the Germans along Belgium's northern and eastern frontiers. 42

⁴¹ FO 123/577: 31 & 33, 44 & 70 (BritEmbB to FO, 26 & 27 Nov, 21 & 16 Nov 44); WO 171/827 (Brussels Garrison Diary, 6 Nov 44 (Atch. 2) & Nov 1944 (Intelligence Summary)).

 $^{^{42}}$ Eisenhower, $Crusade,\ 355$ map; WO 205/359: 34A (SHAEF Msn (Belgium) to 21 AG (Rear), 25 Nov, 26 Nov-1 Dec 44).

The British helped the Belgian government to defuse the confrontation with the FI by agreeing in only three days to accept 30,000 Resistance men for military training in Northern Ireland. After five months of instruction in early 1945, those men would form five brigades in the new Belgian army; Part 4 will cover the military revival in more detail.⁴³

On the opposite side of the controversy over disarming the Resistance was the problem of dealing with Belgian collaborators. The Minister of Justice had promised stern and swift justice for them in a BBC broadcast from London on 9 February 1944. Although many collaborators had fled to Germany with the Wehrmacht in September 1944, approximately 15,000 others were too slow or too naive to escape the wave of arrests in the first two weeks after Belgium's liberation. Those captured by the Resistance were turned over to the proper authorities; there were few deaths caused by mob action. 44

By 31 December 1944, over 50,000 more were arrested. Giving collaborators a swift and fair trial was more difficult than expected, however. The 5,500 accused who were tried between September and December by 13 special war tribunals represented less than eight percent of those detained. During the first five months after liberation, less than one percent of the accused were given sentences by the tribunals and only 29 public officials had been charged with collaboration. The Pierlot government suffered increasingly from a public image of being easy on collaborators; some sceptics felt that the plurality of Catholic Party ministers in the government was trying to win the votes of ex-collaborators and Flemish nationalists. The last charge was grossly unfair, in light of the government's revoking the statutes and official appointments by the Secretaries General at the beginning of September. The first Van Acker government (March-August 1945) that succeeded Pierlot did

⁴³ Powell, Faces, 174-7; Charles, Forces, 95-6.

 $^{^{44}}$ FO 123/571: 1 (Delfosse speech (PWE), 9 Feb 44), 23 (Aveling to Eden, 20 Sep 44), /583: 86 (BritAmbB to Churchill, 29 Jun 45); Conway, Collaboration, 274-5.

act more vigorously against collaborators, but justice continued to remain too slow for an impatient public. 45

The original intent of the Pierlot government had been to follow the lenient policy used after the First World War; clemency would be given to minor collaborators, while no more than 2,000 major collaborators would be tried. The hard-line attitude that developed after 1942 was due to the experiences of the new Minister of Justice (AntMoine Delfosse) between 1940 and 1942, as well as the widespread demand among the population of Belgium for thorough vengeance against those responsible for suffering and betrayals during the occupation. Unfortunately, the only reliable legal system available to handle the collaborator problem was the military one, which was not able to efficiently process such a large and contentious caseload. The cumbersome tribunal process overtaxed the experience and numbers of the military judiciary, producing a backlog that irritated the victims of collaborators and made an easy target for attacks in the press. Insufficient action against black marketing and thefts of coal added to the government's image of being incompetent or even insensitive to the deprivation suffered by law-abiding Belgians.46

The Pierlot government was effective in handling military relationships involving cooperation within a supportive Allied framework that had been thoroughly prepared in Britain. However, the Allies were unable to provide much help to the Belgians with the complex political-legal issue of what to do with large numbers of collaborators, nor could the exiles adequately deal with such a problem until they had been on-site long enough to sort out the extent and degree of collaboration. As long as collaboration

⁴⁵ FO 123/583: 86 (BritAmbB to Churchill, 29 Jun 45); Luc Huyse & Steven Dhondt, *La répression des collaborations 1942-1952* (Bruxelles: CRISP, 1991), 27, 311; FO 371/38873: C13310 (PID Special Annexe, 28 Sep 44). Of 405,067 accused, 57,000 (14%) were tried and 18,100 (4%) convicted from 1944 to 1949.

⁴⁶ Dealing with collaborators was an emotional issue for citizens, but not a top priority for any of the 11 governments during the tribunal period (Sep 1944-Nov 1952). Huyse, *Répression*, 25-6, 65-8, 72-5, 79; FO 371/49032: Z4078 (SHAEF/G5 No.40, 17 Mar 45).

remained an internal Belgian matter and did not affect Allied military operations, SHAEF and the Allied governments had little concern or comment on the subject.

The exiles also needed time in Belgium to sort out their own personal lives and relationships with those they had left behind. This readjustment process also affected the political relationships among members of the government and parliament, as well as their preferences on how to develop their country's political, economic and military future.

Part 3. The Continued Struggle

In the meantime, the war against the Germans in and around the country continued to dominate life for Belgium's government and most of its citizens. XXX Corps used the four mobile Resistance groups around Brussels to guard airfields and bridges, capture isolated groups of Germans, and escort prisoners to camps. A liaison officer from the Armée Secrète was also attached to the British garrison commander in Brussels. The Canadian 2nd Division also used four Resistance groups as reinforcements in late September against the Wehrmacht threat north of Antwerp. 47 The German ground menace was soon superseded by a new one from the air; the first V2 arrived on 12 October, and the first V1 hit two weeks later. Over 1,300 V-weapons blasted the Antwerp area between October 1944 and March 1945, killing over 2,000 people. Fortunately, the 300 V-weapons that hit around the port caused little damage to the docks or locks. Over 1,000 anti-aircraft guns kept aircraft away from key targets, as well as shooting down many of the V1s. The importance of Antwerp to the Germans can be gauged by its unfortunate second ranking only to London as a target for Hitler's V-weapons.48

 $^{^{47}}$ FO 371/38875: C12807 (No. 1 S.F. Detachment, 20 Sep 44); Ready, Forgotten, 325.

⁴⁸ A V2 killing 567 in the Rex cinema on 16 Dec 44 was Antwerp's worst single disaster. Roland Ruppenthal, *Logistical Support of the Armies*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: U.S. Army, 1959), 114-5. Moulton, *Antwerp*, 184-5. London was the target for over 7,000 V1s (Jun-Sep 44)

* * *

Antwerp could not be used as the logistics port needed so desperately by the stalled Allied armies until the 60-mile portion of the Scheldt river between the port and the North Sea was cleared of German guns and mines. While the port's importance had been recognised before, its unique and vital significance became even more apparent after the Allied defeat at Arnhem proved how tough the struggle to defeat Germany would be. Massive amounts of supplies, arms and ammunition would be needed to support a major Allied advance into the Ruhr, and it was also obvious that nearby major Dutch ports such as Rotterdam would not be given up easily by the Germans. Canadian 1st Army fought a bitter battle against the German 15th Army for the first eight days of November along both shores of the Scheldt estuary. A combined commando force of Belgians, Norwegians and Royal Marines landed on Walcheren Island; after a week of hand-to-hand combat, this bastion fell and gave the Allies control of the channel into Antwerp. 49

Minesweeping of the Scheldt by nearly 100 ships in two flotillas then proceeded, clearing over 260 mines. Force B included five Belgian minesweepers that had been recently transferred from Harwich to Ostend. After nearly four weeks of meticulous work, the channel to the second-largest port in Europe was ready for merchant shipping. The first convoy of 18 ships reached Antwerp on 28 November, escorted proudly by two Belgian minesweepers. Within a few days, 10,000 tons a day were being unloaded at the docks. Antwerp was ready just in time for the Allied counteroffensive in the Ardennes three weeks later. The huge port would also prove useful

and over 600 V2s (Sep 44-Mar 45). Mack, London, 143, 150-3.

⁴⁹ A major reason for the Allies' desperate fuel and supply situation was that the advance to Brussels, Antwerp and Aachen (Germany) was 6-8 months ahead of SHAEF's spring 1944 plan. Eisenhower, *Crusade*, 258, 334-6, 342; Reginald Thompson, *The Eighty-five Days* (London: Hutchinson, 1957), 22, 174-210 passim; Moulton, *Antwerp*, 78, 165.

Thompson, 85 Days, 221-2; Moulton, Antwerp, 180-2; September 1944: 50.

later as a ship repair centre to ease the demand on crowded British facilities.⁵¹

In the meantime, more fighting was taking place in the other end of Belgium. After the Allied defeat at Arnhem in mid-September, Belgian paratroopers worked with the Dutch Resistance behind enemy lines for six months to rescue over 400 survivors of the British and Polish airborne assault on bridges over the Lower Rhine. The Piron Brigade infantry and armoured reconnaissance squadron fought in the Albert and Wessem Canal region to push the Germans away from the eastern flank of the Allied advance, while Piron's artillery batteries joined XXX Corps' drive northward to attack Arnhem. Among the towns liberated by the Belgians, Bourg-Léopold's capture gave them special satisfaction; besides containing 900 political prisoners grateful to be released, the camp there had been the prewar army's main training ground. The Brigade faced the Wehrmacht along the Wessem Canal until 17 November, when it was relieved by a British division. The British training, organisation and weapons of the eager Belgians greatly helped their effectiveness as part of 21 Army Group, enabling them to create a record of which their predecessors of May 1940 would have been proud, perhaps even envious.52

German attacks continued to be a threat in eastern Belgium during the winter of 1944-1945. Because Liège was a major storage and distribution point of food and fuel for the Allied armies, it was hit so often by V-weapons that thousands of children were evacuated. When the Germans launched their surprise attack in the Ardennes on 16 December, Eisenhower felt that the depots of Liège would be their first objective. Only later did the Allies learn that the Germans were really aiming at Brussels and Antwerp. The timing and strength

⁵¹ C.P. Stacey, The Victory Campaign (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1960), 422-4; MT 59/1643 (Campbell to ship owners, 18 Dec 44; Antwerp Ship Repairs Subcommittee, 30 Jan & 5 Feb 45).

⁵² Charles, Forces, 75; Weber, Hommes, 106-9, 120-1, 134. Partial credit for the success of Belgian, Polish, Czech and Dutch units in British-led activities must be given to attached British Liaison HQs 2, 4, 22 & 23 respectively. WO 171/175 (21 AG/EACS Diary, Dec 1944).

of the 24-division attack surprised the Allies, but defence and counterattack by the Americans and Allied aircraft kept the invaders away from all three cities. 53

The small Belgian forces had little direct effect on the actions of the armies fighting in the snowy forests. On the other hand, the 5th Fusilier Battalion helped to protect a huge fuel dump at Stavelot from the dangerous SS panzer vanguard of the German attack. In addition, Belgian paratroopers in armed jeeps were active in patrolling the northern edge of the "bulge" caused by the German invasion. They joined with British and French paratroopers and the British 29th Armoured Brigade to establish links between the British north of the "bulge" and the American forces to the south. 54

Local and Allied military authorities worked together to help the 60,000 refugees who had fled from the harsh German invaders. Many of the 50 Allied civil affairs (CA) detachments scattered around Belgium and Luxembourg were sent to the outside edges of the Germanoccupied area to assist civilians, as well as to advise Allied troops trying to conduct operations among confused citizens and congested The CA detachments had been developed through Anglo-American cooperation with Belgian authorities for over a year. Senior commanders (brigade level and above) were sent to short CA courses to emphasise considering important local civilian needs when making military decisions, especially those affecting logistics and administration. The Allies had learned the hard way in Italy in 1943-1944 that civilian authorities were more able and inclined to provide important support if the military was gracious and also if local leaders were coopted into positions of authority. In addition, civilians expected more benefits and better behaviour from their

 $^{^{53}}$ The Germans pushed 50 miles into Belgium before being pushed back by the Americans. Eisenhower, <code>Crusade</code>, 377-86, 391-7; FO 371/49031: Z1479 (SHAEF/G5 No. 32, 20 Jan 45).

⁵⁴ Edouard Blondeel, "Pages de gloire," LALN 1, no. 2 (1946): 4; F. Temmerman, Sixième tiroir aux souvenirs (Bruxelles: Wellens-Pays, 1972), 178-9; Charles MacDonald, The Battle of the Bulge, 237-8, 431, 434. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984)

Allied liberators than they had received from the arrogant and heavy-handed Germans. 55

During the Battle of the Ardennes, the main Belgian ground forces had been in the process of rejuvenating themselves in order to create a new and larger army for use against the Germans and for postwar commitments. After its combat operations along the Wessem Canal, the Piron Brigade was sent to Leuven for necessary rest and reorganisation, after over three months of combat that had earned praise by both their British (Montgomery, 21 Army Group) and American (McLain, XIX Corps) commanders. The British field marshal expressed appreciation for the brigade's conduct in battle, while the American general noted that the Belgians' magnificent work had allowed much larger Allied units to breach the Siegfried Line defences of the German western border. After a month's leave, the brigade group was broken up to form the short-term nucleus of the new Belgian Army: an infantry brigade and regiments of artillery, armoured reconnaissance and engineers. Over 2,400 new officers and men were given nearly four months of training by Piron's cadre of exiles. In early April 1945, the expanded brigade joined the Canadian advance against the continued stubborn German defence in the Netherlands until the end of the war.56

In the meantime, SHAEF had requested in November that auxiliary military units for the Allied rear area in Belgium be formed. Six fusilier (light infantry) battalions were created by the end of 1944 to guard lines of communication, and were split between 21 AG (three Flemish units) and the U.S. Communication Zone (three Walloon units). Eventually 50 more fusilier battalions were formed by the summer of 1945. After more training and supplemental staffing from the British Army, some of these battalions were used for occupation duties in Germany. Approximately three dozen pioneer (light construction) and

⁵⁵ FO 371/49031: Z39 (SHAEF/G5 No. 27, 16 Dec 44), Z1737
(SHAEF/G5 No. 33, 27 Jan 45); Coles, Governors, 798-9; WO 165/84
(Senior Officer Course, 10 Mar 44; CA Training for March, 21 Mar 44).

⁵⁶ De Pinchart, Fusiliers, 6-7, 12-3; Weber, Hommes, 223, 230-2.

transportation companies were also raised for the repair and operation of the Allied lines of communication. The total manpower raised by the Belgians in the above units was about 70,000, allowing the equivalent of several divisions of Allied soldiers to concentrate on combat and combat support operations at the front line.⁵⁷

Other Belgian soldiers in commando and paratrooper (SAS) units fought with 21st Army Group in the northern Netherlands and Germany until the end of the war. These special groups grew to a total strength of 500 after the liberation of their homeland; two more Belgian commando troops had been added to 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando Group, and the paratroopers had become the 5th SAS Regiment (in jeeps rather than aircraft, however). By September 1945, all of these elite soldiers had returned to Belgium from Germany. 58

Most members of the Section Belge of the Royal Navy returned to Belgium by the end of 1944. The Belgian minesweeper flotilla moved to Ostend from Harwich in September, and stayed there after clearing the Scheldt in November. Mines laid by German E-boats based in Holland and U-boats remained a threat to Antwerp shipping for several more months. The Belgian crews of the corvettes Godetia and Buttercup were transferred ashore at the end of 1944 to replace British naval personnel in port administration in Flanders. A thousand more naval recruits were trained in Britain by May 1945, when the Section Belge split from the RN; the new men reinforced the tired cadre of exiles in their port and coastline duties.⁵⁹

Belgian airmen, who had been the first to strike back at the Germans after reaching Britain, were also the last to leave British units. The Belgians in 609 Squadron were discharged or sent to 349

 $^{^{57}}$ FO 371/38898: C15744 (SHAEF Msn (Belgium) No. 3, 31 Oct 44); WO 205/767: 3 & 9 (Knox to 21 AG, 8 Dec 44 & 20 Mar 45), 10 (HQ LOC to 7, 9, 20 Sub-areas, 4 Nov 45); Charles, Forces, 95. Pioneer units in British-style military organisations were often used as construction crews. Mercer, Chronicle, 133.

⁵⁸ WO 218/88 (War Diary, 25 & 26 Mar, 23 Aug 45); Ladd, *SAS*, 100, 103; WO 205/209: 61A & B (HQ SAS, 20 Mar 45).

⁵⁹ ADM 199/296 (ADM (King), 6 Dec 44; ADM to CinC Nore, 8 Jan
45), /1456 (War History Appendix XIII, 9); Gerard, Battre, 47-9.

or 350 Squadrons between May and September 1945. The latter two units continued combat operations over the Netherlands and Germany until May 1945, when they joined British occupation forces before reverting to full Belgian control in October 1946.

From September 1944 to May 1945, the Belgian military forces grew in strength and unity. They suffered shortages and growing pains in the process, but their cohesion was bolstered by their clear and common mission of helping to defeat Germany. Unfortunately, their civilian compatriots in the government and on the street had a lot of trouble with national political and economic cohesion during this period.

Part 4. Shortages and Division

Shortages of food, coal and transportation hindered the Belgian economic recovery, as well as increasing the discontent among Parliament members and the electorate with the Pierlot government. Food and supplies provided to the Allied armies under mutual aid agreements, as well as the expense of creating new Belgian army units and funding current forces, were a major drain on the depleted resources of a small country. The euphoria of liberation faded back into a daily struggle to survive during the bitter winter of 1944-1945. The Belgian people were willing to accept a short-term government until the postliberation chaos had been reduced and expatriates brought home. Once the deportees and prisoners in Germany, as well as the exiles in western Europe and the United States, were back in Belgium, a general election would be held. 61

⁶⁰ Ziegler, 609 Squadron, 317; Charles, Forces, 101. The return of the Belgian fliers was delayed because of a shortage of support equipment, aircraft and airfields in Belgium. Lucien Leboutte, "Notre Aviation Militaire," LALN 4, no.1 (1949): 16.

⁶¹ FO 371/38896: C13741 (Morton (W.P.(44) 551, 3 Oct 44). Belgium's first postwar national election was held in Feb 1946. Mallinson, *Belgium*, 136.

Belgium was in a mess in October 1944, in spite of its rapid liberation by the Allies. Postal and telegraph services were disorganised internally, and nonexistent to the outside world. Road transportation was one-seventh of the 1940 level, and the reduced number of railway rolling stock was badly worn from inadequate maintenance. Civilian health suffered in a similar manner from malnutrition. Many factories were closed due to lack of coal and raw materials, and trade was disrupted pending an advertised currency reform. The problems were so widespread and varied that all Pierlot could do at first was to ask Belgians for help and patience in a national broadcast on 25 October 1944.62

The Belgian Minister of Finance, Camille Gutt, felt that drastic currency reform measures needed to be enacted as soon as possible to reduce inflation and capture war profits made from business dealings with the Germans or the black market. Delayed over a week in Britain by a lack of ships, the 120 tons of largedenomination bills did not arrive in Belgium until 22 September. During the month between the announcement of an undefined currency reform and the implementation of it, farmers refused to sell food for old notes and stores raised prices. 63 The impasse was broken in mid-October, when Belgians were allowed to exchange old bank notes of 100 Belgian Francs (BF) or greater for new bills up to a total of BF2000. All other large denomination currency, precious metals and financial instruments such as stocks and insurance contracts were to be declared by the end of the month. This bold policy reduced inflation by strict control over the money supply, and identified those people who had made excess profits between 1940 and 1944; it was therefore accepted by most Belgians.64

 $^{^{62}}$ FO 371/38869: C15550 (British Chamber of Commerce in Belgium, 4 Nov 44); News 4 (1944): 325-30.

 $^{^{63}}$ Inflation was inevitable in wartime Belgium: industrial output in 1944 was 35% of the 1939 level, but currency in circulation had grown 300%. Gutt, Carrefour, 177, 182-3; FO 371/38868: C12477 (SHAEF to FO, 19 Sep 44), /38896: C13047 (Morton to Harrison, 26 Sep 44).

⁶⁴ FO 371/38869: C15727 (SHAEF (Ecker-Racz), 10 Oct 44).

(5 October 1944)

Signing the Anglo-Belgian Monetary Agreement Vat the same time as currency reforms were being implemented provided external stability for the Belgian franc while internal stability was also being established. This was done to encourage resumption of the international trade that was vital to Belgium's economy. exchange rate of £1 to BF176.625 was set to match the wartime rate for the Congo franc, which kept an easier link between products from Belgium and its huge colony. This rate was also consistent with the Belgium-Netherlands-Luxembourg Customs Union Agreement of 5 September 1944, and continued a familiar rate that the British would accept.65 Such bold and thorough financial action taken over a two-year period was a major achievement of the Pierlot government, especially for its Minister of Finance. The importance and complexity of rehabilitating the Belgian franc was appreciated by the Belgian parliament, which allowed Gutt a pivotal role in forming a new government in September 1944, as described in Part 2 above. Indicators of the merit of the internal reform actions included their continuation after Gutt left office, long-term reduction of inflation, and Anglo-American praise of the results.66

Food was chronically short in Belgium during the winter of 1944-1945, so the black market was able to continue selling at inflated prices in spite of government measures against it. The food shortage was aggravated by the required provisioning of the Allied military under mutual aid agreements, as well as by the German destruction of livestock during their Ardennes invasion. By the end of 1944, the Belgians were providing the Allied armies a generous amount of labour and accommodation, control of the railways and canals, and monthly totals of 4,000 tons of fruit and vegetables and

⁶⁵ FO 371/38869: C15727 (SHAEF (Ecker-Racz), 10 Oct 44), /38885: C11997 (NethAmbGB to Eden, 8 Sep 44), C13496 (Treasury to FO, 3 Oct 44); September 1944, 29-34.

⁶⁶ Van Aal, *Télémemoires*, 176-8. Excess funds were gradually restored to Belgians; only 2.5% of "blocked" monies were confiscated as illegal war profits. Mallinson, *Belgium*, 128.

900,000 tons of coal.67

Since the food shortage in Belgium when the country was liberated had been less than expected, General Erskine felt that food problems could generally be solved by a better distribution system. Pierlot therefore backed off from his request in late October for help from SHAEF, and tried to reassure his restless and hungry nation that the shortages would improve soon after Antwerp was opened. This delay in receiving Allied help with food made life more difficult for the Belgians, similar to the problem of getting the new currency from London to Brussels. 68

General Erskine knew that a healthy and contented workforce would provide more efficient support for the Allied logistics network centred in Belgium, so he was willing to provide a token food supplement of 200 tons a day from 21st Army Group stocks to the Pierlot government for most of November. A desire to lower the frustration of leaders in Belgium and the Congo led Erskine in early November to request that 28,000 tons of supplies and food stockpiled in the Congo be shipped as soon as Antwerp was open. Combined with the estimated food that the Belgian government felt it could get and distribute between November and February, Erskine and Pierlot hoped to provide adequate rations to all civilians through the winter.⁶⁹

Unpredicted problems with winter weather, insufficient shipping, military pre-emption of surface transportation, inadequate rations and growing Belgian disaffection with the burden of supporting so many foreign soldiers persuaded Generals Erskine and Eisenhower to support civilian needs more generously by late November. The continuing inability of unpopular food collectors to

 $^{^{67}}$ FO 93/14: 145 (Anglo-Belgian Agreement, 22 Aug 44); FO 371 /49031: Z39 & Z2170 (SHAEF/G5 No. 27 & 34, 16 Dec 44 & 3 Feb 45); FO 123/581: 5 (FO memo, 19 Dec 44).

 $^{^{68}}$ FO 123/572: 64-6 (Between FO and BritEmbB, 23-24 Oct 44); FRUS 1945, 4: 83-5.

⁶⁹ FO 371/38897: C14906 (Aveling to FO, 28 Oct 44); PREM 4/29: 11 (Aveling to FO, 8 Nov 44). Daily (calorie) rations varied by job type (percentage of adults): basic (1838) (85%), heavy work (2418) (5%), miners (3991) (3%). WO 220/108: 35B.

get food from recalcitrant farmers to hungry cities meant that the official ration was still only 1,450 calories a day, well below the Allied standard of 2,000 calories judged necessary to prevent disease and discontent. SHAEF authorised an average of 78,000 tons per month from its stocks to be imported into Belgium from January to May 1945, and generally met these quotas. The ending of Belgium's status as an official war zone in February 1945 opened up more space in shipping and ports, as well as allowing in aid from the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Even with these improvements in imports, the basic ration in Belgium only reached 2,000 calories a day in June 1945. Allied estimates of civilian food import requirements had been grossly low for all liberated countries in northwestern Europe; 2,000 calories per day only became the norm in that region after the war.⁷⁰

Another factor under Allied control that contributed to the food shortage in Belgium was the delayed release of fishing boats from war duties under Royal Navy contracts. A Belgian request in March 1945 for the release of 46 large and small trawlers resulted in only 14 of them being named for release by July, two months after Germany's surrender. Belgian fishermen exiled with their families did not return home until July, even though their home ports had been open since January. With so many wartime restrictions still affecting Belgium's food supply, the practice of sending large numbers of children to Switzerland to regain their health was carried over from the dark days of German occupation. 71

National dissatisfaction with continuing shortages prompted General Erskine to make a radio broadcast on 4 February 1945 to counter persistent rumours that the Allies were exporting food and

 $^{^{70}}$ FO 123/572: 48 (BritAmbB to Eden, 4 Oct 44), 81 (Aveling to FO, 7 Nov 44); Donnison, Civil Affairs, 318-321, 326; FO 371/49032: Z2705 (SHAEF/G5 Summary No. 36, 17 Feb 45). Increased SHAEF food relief for Belgium was partially due to the efforts of Paul Kronacker, Minister of Supply, in the USA. FRUS 1945, 4: 83-8.

 $^{^{71}}$ ADM 1/18117 (Higham to Gallop, 5 Jul 45); WO 202/613 (Belgian Repatriation Commission, 1 Jul 45); FO 371/49031: Z112 (SHAEF/G5 to Combined Chiefs of Staff, 1 Jan), Z1479 (SHAEF/G5 No. 32, 20 Jan 45).

coal from Belgium. He reminded his listeners that SHAEF had imported nearly 50,000 tons of food (especially meats and fats) in three months for civilian use, and that the coal shortage in neighbouring Continental countries was equally bad or worse. This was small comfort to a country that was struggling to provide the Allies generous amounts of fruit, coal and other items.⁷²

Shortages of coal were created by politically-motivated strikes, as well as by shortages of transport and wooden mine supports. A major Communist-led miners' strike in January 1945 reduced the coal supply by half, which crippled the operation of coal-burning railway locomotives, factories and power stations. Public and political criticism rose to a high level, and neither General Erskine or the new British ambassador, Sir Hugh Knatchbull-Hugessen, had much faith in Pierlot's ability to resolve the strike with vigour. However, as long as Allied security or supplies were not threatened, SHAEF did not intend to intervene with either armed troops or constructive assistance.

Political and public relations problems had increased notably for the Pierlot government after the crisis over disarming the Resistance in November. The left-wing press in Britain, as well as in Belgium, criticised the Pierlot government as unconstitutional and reactionary for its measures against the Front de 1'Indépendance. Eden defended both the Belgian government and British Army support for it in parliament against Labour attacks. After the Communists lost credibility by fomenting unrest through the Front and the coal miners, the Socialists decided to stay in a national coalition government led by the conservatives until events were more favourable for left-wing leadership. Another factor that prolonged the time in office of Pierlot's last government was public unwillingness to

 $^{^{72}}$ FO 123/581: 5 (FO memo, 19 Dec 44), 31 (Erskine speech, 4 Feb 45).

⁷³ Pierlot's successor continued to have trouble with coal miner strikes and Communist involvement in them. FO 123/581: 9 (BritAmbB to FO, 27 Jan 45), /582: 67 (BritAmbB to FO, 22 May 45). Trained miners, as well as coal, were in short supply in liberated Europe.

hamper the Allied war effort, even though widespread discontent lingered concerning the food and coal shortages.⁷⁴

The patience of the Socialist party leadership finally ran out at the beginning of February, due to the inability of the Pierlot government to make significant improvements in solving the festering problems of food and coal shortages, coal miners' strikes, and slow prosecution of collaborators. On 3 February 1945, all five Socialist ministers resigned, including Spaak. The three Liberal ministers were also ready to quit, so Pierlot knew there was no hope of salvaging his government. After a spirited defence of actions taken by his cabinet to solve Belgium's many national problems, Pierlot and the remaining seven ministers stepped down. Consistently loyal to the Allies for over four years, he did not try to pass the blame for Belgium's woes onto the Anglo-American armies that had been using so much of his country's resources.⁷⁵

Six years as prime minister had ended for Hubert Pierlot. 76
By the time his government fell in early 1945, Pierlot had created a good foundation for his successors to build on. The Belgians were active and respected partners in the Allied coalition which had freed Belgium and was a few months away from final victory. Among the five men who transferred from the Pierlot to the Van Acker cabinet were three in key positions who owed much of their importance in 1945 to having served in Pierlot's government. Achille Van Acker, the premier who formed a new cabinet on 12 February 1945, was a Resistance leader and Socialist deputy whose first cabinet position had been as the labour minister from 1944 to 1945. Paul-Henri Spaak

 $^{^{74}}$ FO 123/573: 103 & 108 (Between BritAmbB and Eden, 28 Nov & 2 Dec 44), 134 (BritAmbB to Harvey, 27 Dec 44); FO 371/49031: Z39 & 1479 (SHAEF/G5 No. 27 & 32, 16 Dec 44 & 20 Jan 45).

⁷⁵ Coles, *Governors*, 818; Donnison, *Civil Affairs*, 122; FO 123/581: 22 & 35 (Aveling to Eden, 3 & 8 Feb 45). Pierlot was also loyal to his 5 most-criticised ministers, rejecting Socialist demands to dismiss them. FO 371/48975: Z1751 (Aveling to Eden, 3 Feb 45).

⁷⁶ Pierlot was premier from 21 Feb 39 to 8 Feb 45, except for a few weeks in Mar-Apr 1939. He led five governments which lasted from a week (Feb 1939) to nearly five years (Jan 1940-Sep 1944). FO 432/6: 135 (Oliphant to FO, 6 Jan 40); Mallinson, Belgium, 109, 134-5.

seemed to be the perpetual foreign minister as he continued his eighth year of handling international relations; he had learned much and met many important people during his exile in London. Paul Kronacker continued as the Minister of Supply, using prior contacts made in London, Washington, D.C., and Montreal to negotiate for shipping and food in particular.⁷⁷

Although Pierlot could claim credit for much of the progress made by Belgium in fighting the war and recovering from the German occupation, there were few people in his country or Britain who were sorry to see his government go at that time. Most of the Belgian press supported the change of regime, and even Pierlot's deputy prime minister said that it would have been better if someone who had experienced the German occupation would have become premier in September 1944. Both the British ambassador, Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen, and General Erskine also felt that Pierlot had not been strong enough to deal with Belgium's problems.⁷⁸

Much of the criticism aimed at the Pierlot government was justified. As a group, they were very reluctant to make firm or bold actions because of their fragile political coalition and uncertain knowledge of the needs or mood of the country. Pierlot in particular was handicapped by the conflicting demands of cabinet consensus, popular dissatisfaction and Allied military priorities. As a leader from the old generation, he epitomised the prewar Belgian majority that was cautious, conservative and distrustful of strangers (including foreigners). It should be remembered that Pierlot would have preferred to pass on national leadership in September 1944 to the next generation, who had proven themselves against the German

Mallinson, Belgium, 135, 230-1. Van Acker led 4 govts. (1945-46, 1954-8). Spaak led 3 govts. (1938-9, 1946-9), and was usually Foreign Min. during 1936-49, 1954-7 and 1961-6. Kronacker was Supply Min. 1944-7. Hasquin, Dictionnaire, 440, 469; Devolder, Procèsverbaux, 224, 260; Kronacker, Souvenirs, 136-41.

 $^{^{78}}$ The British Foreign Office was also ready for a change. FO 123/581: 9 & 25 (Between FO and BritEmbB, 27 Jan & 4 Feb 45), /582: 43 (BritAmbB-de Schrijver meeting, 16 Feb 45); WO 202/550 (SHAEF Msn. Nos. 87 & 97, 3 & 17 Feb 45).

occupiers and were knowledgeable about Belgian political undercurrents. At the time, no one with adequate experience as a government minister and Resistance member had proven himself capable of being prime minister. The same limitations also affected to a lesser extent the choices available as cabinet ministers in the period of uncertainty immediately after national liberation.⁷⁹

An indirect handicap for Pierlot in dealing with the British, his most important ally, was the experience and personality of the top leadership in the British embassy in Brussels. Ambassador Knatchbull-Hugessen was unfamiliar with the Belgian situation, and came to Brussels with a tarnished reputation from his problems in Turkey. This probably allowed Pierlot's critic, the experienced British embassy counsellor A. Francis Aveling, more influence and voice than would have usually been the case.⁸⁰

Pierlot's government was also hampered by a shortage of staff in the government ministries, due to transportation and housing shortages keeping many of the exiled bureaucrats in Britain long after September 1944. Pierlot and his government were therefore in the difficult situation of trying to "do more with less," as they dealt with the often conflicting needs of Belgian civilians and the Allied military forces. This does not excuse the weaknesses of the Pierlot cabinet members, but should at least put their problems in a more understanding light.

As spring arrived in 1945, the inhabitants of Belgium had good reason to be hopeful after a difficult winter. Their standard of living had survived in fairly good shape compared to France and the Netherlands, where black markets also thrived, but with higher

⁷⁹ Van Aal, *Télémemoires*, 171-3.

⁸⁰ The FO backed Knatchbull-Hugessen as one of its stalwarts, but serious 1943-44 intelligence leaks from his Ankara embassy worried Whitehall. Robin Denniston, *Churchill's Secret War: Diplomatic Decrypts, the Foreign Office and Turkey 1942-44* (Stroud, UK: Sutton, 1997), 41, 75, 83. Aveling's bias is discussed in Chapter II.

⁸¹ FO 371/38896: C12107 (Mineur to Oliphant, 12 Sep 44).

prices. Belgian forces actively fighting the Germans included an enlarged regular brigade, some fusilier battalions and two new commando troops, which improved national pride and the army's reputation.

The defeat of Germany and the liberation of King Leopold III in Austria brought the question of his wartime conduct and fitness to be king to an occasional boiling point during the period from 1945 to 1950. The unique Belgian Royal Question generated many opinions on how to treat the former prisoner-king, but these were kept in the background for long periods by Belgian governments which did not want to be distracted from what they felt were more pressing problems during national reconstruction. The effects of Leopold's actions on the Belgian government from 1936 to 1944 have been discussed in chapters I and IV, but the complex issue of Leopold's postwar status and national support is outside the scope of this thesis. It was unfortunate for both Belgium and King Leopold III that his status as an exile and monarch remained unresolved for so long.84

⁸² FO 425/423: Z1288 (BritAmbB to Eden, 22 Jan 45); FO 371/49032: Z2869 (SHAEF/G5 No. 36, 24 Feb 45); Van Aal, Télémemoires, 176-7.

⁸³ Charles, Forces, 95-99. Major German forces in the Alsace province of France were not driven out until Feb 1945; the isolated enemy garrisons in French ports were discussed in Part 1 of this chapter. The Germans were in the western Netherlands until May 1945. Mercer, Chronicle, 103, 603, 632, 647.

⁸⁴ The Royal Question concerning whether Leopold should remain king pitted his Fleming and Catholic supporters against Walloons and Socialists from 1945 to 1951, when he abdicated in favour of his son. Mallinson, *Belgium*, 136-9. Other books on this from my bibliography include those by Arango, Stengers and Van Langenhove (*Garants*).

Part 5. Conclusion

It took Leopold several years to return home, but he was not the only Belgian who felt that his return was unfairly delayed or problematic. Many thousands of Belgians in Allied territory had to wait until after VE-Day to be repatriated, due to insufficient shipping, as well as inadequate supplies of food, fuel and housing in their homeland. Some of the returning exiles were resented by those "left behind," while others were reintegrated happily with family and friends.

After the surrender of the Third Reich, humanitarian concerns prompted giving priority for repatriation to prisoners of war and labour deportees. By the beginning of July 1945, 240,000 Belgians forced into German detention camps or factories had returned home from Germany. 85 Over 11,000 Belgians were still in Britain, but repatriation by sea to Ostend started to accelerate that month. After five years of exile, returnees were allowed to carry only 168 pounds of luggage and enough food for the ten-hour journey from London. Repatriation of the 20,000 Belgians in the Congo waiting to go home proceeded more slowly, since small groups of them did not board ships destined for Antwerp until June 1945.86

Some of the returnees had few problems when they came home to Belgium. A veteran of the Piron Brigade recalls that his family felt he was fortunate to escape to England, but there was little jealousy. He was, however, sceptical of some of those who claimed service in the Resistance. Others who returned encountered resentment of their freedom in exile and their glamour (if in the military) or authority (if in the government). Exiles were often more conservative than the "homesitters," who had been radicalised by their suffering under the

 $^{^{85}}$ FO 371/49033: Z9121 (SHAEF/G5 No. 56, 7 Jul 45). Over 66,000 of the returnees from Germany were POWs. WO 202/595 (SHAEF/G5, 1 May 44).

⁸⁶ FO 371/48985: Z9351 (Ledger to Eden, 11 Jul 45); WO 202/613
(Belgian Repatriation Commission, 1 Jul; WO Movement Control to
SHAEF/G5, 7 Jul 45). Leaving Britain involved tedious paperwork, such
as security checks, medical exams, exit permits, Displaced Person
cards and currency conversion; returning from exile was not easy!

harsh German occupation. This split even affected Socialists;

Achille Van Acker and his Resistance colleagues took control of party
policy and leadership after Belgium's liberation from Camille

Huysmans and other "Londoners."⁸⁷

It was true that the exile in Britain was an agreeable time for many of the Belgian exiles, especially the unmarried persons in the military or government. Foreign Minister Spaak felt that he became more prudent and mature while in London, where his political horizons grew much wider because of the important leaders he met. 88 On the other hand, some of the ordinary civilians, especially the older ones, missed friends and family very much; the alien scare of 1940 and the gruff Royal Patriotic School process cast long shadows over their stay in Britain. 89 Perhaps young men in uniform had the warmest memories of this period, since they were on the most intense adventure of their lives, fighting for their national freedom while being exposed to new places, people and ideas. One of them later recalled his feelings about his time in England as follows:

I have never felt an exile in Britain, nor have most of my brother officers....

A number of minor civil servants whose presence in Britain was due to the hazards of war and who were prevented from returning home as they would have wished, who spoke no English, or very little, considered themselves as exiles- which indeed they were. Nevertheless, all of them were grateful for the warmth with which they were welcomed by their British hosts and real friendships developed. After the war, having returned to their traditional environment, they admitted that their lives had been rather enjoyable and many of them thought of this period as "their finest hour." 90

Their experience in Britain was remembered with pride and

⁸⁷ Devos, Interview; Donnison, *Civil Affairs*, 139-40; José Gotovich, *Camille Huysmans Geschriften en Documenten*, vol. VIII (Antwerpen: Standaard Wetenschappelijke Uitgeverei, 1981), 50. The Dutch "homesitters" and "Englandfarers" had similar problems. Hazelhoff, *Orange*, 215-7.

⁸⁸ Spaak and Pierlot also learned English in exile, a useful skill for diplomacy. Spaak, Continuing, 62, 90.

⁸⁹ FO 371/24275: C7547 (De Sausmarez to Aveling, 3 Jul 40),
/24285: C7777 (BelEmbGB to Passport & Permit Office (P & P), 23 Jul;
P & P to FO, 26 Jul; FO (Lambert), 31 Jul 40), /32230: W1185 (FO (Ward), 6 Jan 42).

⁹⁰ Jean Bloch, Letter to author, 30 Aug 96.

pleasure by thousands of those who received shelter and friendship at a time of crisis for themselves and for their hosts. The cumulative importance of their bond with the British people is summed up very well by a pamphlet prepared for the Air Ministry in 1944:

What of the future? The result of this great sacrifice cannot be temporary. The infiltration into the insular life of Great Britain by thousands of young Poles, Czechoslovaks, Norwegians, Dutch, Belgians and Frenchmen must do something to affect that life....These men have lived in Britain and, while fighting for their own countries, have fought for Britain and the ideals which will live while Britain lives....

If there is to be a better international understanding in the future, its roots are here. They are the roots of living men. 91

And so the long journey of the exiles that took them to Britain for over four years finally brought them back to Belgium. Both they and their homeland had changed during the years of separation, worry, death, destruction and adjustment. As the exiles were reunited with their homes and family to make a new beginning in 1944-1945, they brought a little bit of Britain back with them. They also left a little bit of Belgium behind them with their British hosts and comrades. For most of those involved, their experiences gave them a broader perspective that would help them meet the challenges of a new postwar world.

 $^{^{91}}$ Ministry of Information, There's Freedom in the Air (London: HMSO, 1944), 34-5.

Chapter VII: Conclusion

The main theme of this analysis was how the Belgian governmentin-exile redeemed its reputation from 1940 to 1945 with the British government and with its own people in a complex process involving political, economic, social and military factors. The fourth government of Prime Minister Hubert Pierlot in mid-1940 was a body without its royal head of state, with a shattered policy of independent neutrality, and which was unwelcome both in its host country of France and in its homeland. Four years later, his reduced exile cabinet in Britain reached a modest level of respect and acceptance through diligent effort as an enthusiastic member of the successful Allied coalition, as well as by being the primary focal point for Belgian national interests. The successor government that Pierlot promised after liberation turned out to be an expanded version of his exiled cabinet. His last regime from September 1944 to February 1945 continued to turn to the British for help while trying to follow the plans and commitments made in exile, and can therefore be considered a direct extension of the exile experience in Britain.

During the defeat and confusion of 1940, the British, French and Belgians made many mistakes, as chronicled in Chapter I. As the smallest nation, and the first of the three to be occupied by the Germans, its reputation was hurt the most in 1940 when France, and then Britain, blamed Belgium for Allied losses on the battlefield. King Leopold III was most at fault for trying to follow his father's example of staying in Belgium in 1914, when the changed circumstances of 1940 required new responses. The king opened a serious split in the national leadership that shocked the Allies and hurt the unity of Belgium's population, military and diplomatic corps. A united leadership was very important to a national cause, as a Norwegian publication emphasised when it stated that the most valuable contribution to the unity between the home front and the exiles was

the decision of the King and Government not to capitulate, but

rather to go into exile and continue the struggle... the king and his men did not waiver. They gave the command to fight on, for freedom and justice....Thus the nation immediately obtained a stable cohesion in the country's Chief of State, its legal government and its military leadership....

The second early Belgian leadership action that caused problems was Pierlot's vacillation in France. The prime minister's indecision was caused by loyalty to Leopold, concern for the Belgian refugees in France, and his own fear of making a mistake that would break up his fragile coalition government. In hindsight, it is obvious that Pierlot should have left France earlier for Britain or the United States, helping the Red Cross from a distance to continue its job of repatriating the Belgian refugees. Just as King Leopold III could be faulted for not following the obvious example of Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands in fleeing to Britain, so Pierlot could be faulted for not following some Belgian officials, as well as government ministers from the Netherlands and Luxembourg, across the borders into Spain and Portugal. He had planned to go to Britain if the French government had chosen to fight on from Africa, so Pierlot must have felt that the Belgian refugees could get home in his absence if necessary.2 Many bitter Belgian soldiers and airmen in France would have preferred his absence, if that meant that they got a choice about where they could go. Pierlot's threat of a court-martial for desertion if they tried to go to free territory instead of occupied Belgium caused deep and lasting resentment in the Belgian military. On the positive side, Pierlot must be credited for his determination and courage in finally leaving Vichy and several of his ministers in August 1940, then escaping again from Spain two months later.3

¹ Royal Norwegian Government Information Office, *Before We Go Back* (London: HMSO, 1944), 10. Leopold's influence started declining in the following areas by these times (discussed in chapter-part): diplomatic by early 1941 (II-2), military by late 1942 (V-3), national by early 1943 (IV-4).

 $^{^{2}}$ Van Langenhove, <code>Garants</code>, 89, 175; FO 371/24277: C13460 (Raman-Spaak meeting, 3 Dec 40).

³ Schepens, *De Belgen*, 113; Devos, interview; Boelaerts, "Archives," 162, 190, 194, 271-2. Few 56 year-old men have the stamina to make a two-month journey starting with 3 days in a hot no man's land with his wife and 7 children, and ending with a bumpy ride

After the arrival of Pierlot and Spaak in London at the end of October 1940, the experience of the Belgians was similar in many aspects to that of the other exiled governments and their compatriots. Adjusting to being a guest government in London and a junior partner in a new coalition, taking care of displaced citizens, organising new military forces, securing funds and control of overseas assets, overcoming internal challenges, and keeping in contact with both the homeland and expatriates (especially in North America) were among the tasks also faced by the Poles, Czechs, Dutch, Norwegians, and French in Britain from 1940 to 1944. Chapters II through V concentrated on Anglo-Belgian relations concerning the topics above, but they also provide a better understanding of the challenges faced by other exiled governments in working with their British hosts.⁴

Interaction between the exiles and their British hosts occurred at three different levels: individual civilian, official government organisation, and military. The British did fairly well after the summer of 1940 as hosts and mentors to the many thousands of civilians from occupied Europe who sought refuge; some of them were even fleeing German oppression for the second time. The alien spy panic of the summer of 1940, combined with the general maltreatment and mistrust of aliens from Germany, Austria and Italy, reflected badly on the reputation of the British for cool thinking and fair play. It was not unreasonable to expect better behaviour, as the challenges of dealing with exiles in Britain had been encountered in the First World War, and the anti-Axis character of Jewish, Czech and Polish refugees from the Third Reich between 1933 and 1940 was not

lasting nearly 24 hours hidden in a truck compartment.

⁴ Although it was in the British-led group of Allies, the leaders of Luxembourg did not share the full experiences of exile in London (Chapter II, Part 5). The French became more independent of the British after moving their headquarters to N. Africa in 1943, and becoming a military client of the U.S. Eisenhower, Crusade, 98, 310.

hidden from Whitehall.⁵ These flaws were balanced by the kindness shown by individual Britons after they became friends with exiles, and by the British ability to evolve organisations and attitudes as required by changing circumstances. Examples of the latter included setting up Anglo-exile labour exchanges, integrating British and foreign social services to help exiles, helping to set up clubs for Allied seamen in several ports, and having the British Council cosponsor exile national cultural centres in London. Over half of all the exiles lived in the British capital, whose natives generally grew friendlier after the "fifth column" scare of 1940 was over. However, some of the local citizens resented the jobs and welfare benefits given to the exiles, particularly if the latter exceeded British levels of assistance.⁶

The British government had no precedent for guidance on how to accommodate sovereign foreign governments functioning in its own capital. The Foreign Office was the primary liaison between the top British and exile leaders, but there was interaction with foreign agencies on more routine or specialised matters by other British departments such as the Treasury and the military services. In the case of the Belgian government, the Foreign Office staff privately labelled Pierlot and Spaak in late 1940 as "two rather worthless individuals." Publicly, the Foreign Office worked to create a functional compromise between Belgian factions in order to unite Belgian efforts and resources for the war effort against Germany. It was this department that sought in 1940 to curb excessive press criticism of the Pierlot government, as well as get better treatment of Allied officials by the Home Office. During the next four years,

 $^{^{\}rm 5}$ C.F. Fraser, Control of Aliens in the British Commonwealth of Nations (London: Hogarth, 1940), 40-1; Ponting, 1940, 151-2.

 $^{^6}$ HO 213/588 (Census, 31 Mar 44). For the impact of the "fifth column" scare and Anglo-Belgian cooperation on individual civilians, see chapters II and III.

⁷ FO 371/24277: C11353 (FO (Makins), 5 Oct 40).

 $^{^{8}}$ FO 371/24276: C8827 (Ward to $\it Times$, 28 Aug 40), /25198: W9656 (Halifax to Anderson, 21 Aug 40).

the Foreign Office grew more comfortable with the Belgians. In May 1944, Foreign Minister Anthony Eden even defended the Belgians privately to Churchill. Pierlot had chosen to complain personally to the British prime minister about deaths from Allied bombing and about how Belgium was mentioned in a parliamentary speech. Churchill vented his extreme annoyance with such a distraction just before D-Day, but Eden reminded his boss that the Belgian ministers had been cooperative and wholeheartedly pro-British since their arrival in London over three years before.

On the other hand, there was also ample disagreement, confusion and irritation between British government officials and their exiled counterparts. Churchill in particular never forgave the Belgian leaders, especially King Leopold III, for their prewar neutrality and the capitulation of May 1940; the memories of British sacrifices in Flanders during the First World War were too strong for him to shake In spite of Pierlot's full cooperation with the British from late 1940 to early 1945, Churchill's lingering dislike of the Belgian leaders remained. The letter to Eden on 27 May 44 expressed much the same anger found in his parliamentary speech 4 years earlier, in which he had condemned the Belgian surrender and neutrality. Another key British official whose attitude gave the Belgian government some difficulty was the counsellor of the British embassy to Belgium, A. Frank Aveling. His partisan support of the Belgian Parliamentary Office and consistent focus on the deficiencies of Pierlot created an overly negative filter for official Anglo-Belgian communications. Pierlot certainly had his deficiencies, but he was not the only Allied leader who irritated Churchill. General Charles de Gaulle of France was probably the most difficult exile leader to work with, because of his rudeness and haughty demeanour. 10

 $^{^9}$ FO 954/44: 3 (Eden to Oliphant, 26 May 44); PREM 3/69A: 53, 58-9 (Churchill-Eden, 27 & 31 May 44).

¹⁰ Churchill, CHAR 9/140A (Commons speech, 4 Jun 40); Le Soir
(Bruxelles), 5 Jan 96. Churchill later wrote that he knew de Gaulle
"was no friend of England." Churchill, War, 375, 646. Chapters II and
VI covered Aveling's biased activities until his overdue retirement

On a more general note, the few British initiatives to unite the exile governments were only partly successful. The inter-Allied conference at St. James Palace on 12 June 1941 highlighted the fact that the British Empire and the Allied exiles shared a common enemy, but they did not completely agree on the details of how to defeat the Axis. Joint policies proved to be impossible, due to national idiosyncrasies and the discomfort of some of the exiled leaders with the dominant personality of General Sikorski of Poland. However, a useful joint resolution was agreed on; it is to the credit of the British that they could get such a diverse group to support it. The resolution symbolised the common determination of the British-led Allies to defeat the Axis, and also reinforced the British image in the United States of being the European bastion of freedom and justice. It also confirmed the need for Churchill's government to keep control of strategy and operations for all the Allied forces in Britain. 11

Although the British often treated the smaller Allies more casually than they did the Americans or Soviets, they rarely interfered in the internal politics of the exiles. For example, the British did not force Pierlot to expand his cabinet of four ministers in 1940-1941, in spite of the support of left-wing British cabinet members and the BPO for such a change. In more crucial matters, the British were more likely to step in. Examples of this include forcing rival French exile generals Charles de Gaulle and Henri Giraud in early 1943 to meet and cooperate, and intervening with British troops in the Greek civil war in December 1944 against communist insurgents. An exception to the standard policy in 1945 of repatriating exiles to their homeland was caused by the British sense of moral obligation to the Poles in Britain, who were allowed to stay

in 1946, after serving in that embassy for several years.

¹¹ PREM 3/45/3: 22 (Allied resolution, 12 Jun 41), 43 (Churchill to Roosevelt, 7 Jun 41); Butler, *Strategy*, 560. This joint resolution was a basis for the United Nations Declaration of 1 Jan 42.

instead of returning to persecution in communist Poland. 12

The British were generally successful with straightforward military matters, including the Belgian forces. However, it took two years for the British Army to recover and reorganise after its initial defeats by the Germans and Japanese, during which there was little it could do to help the exile armies. The most effective measure taken during this period was the liaison headquarters system, which provided at least some links to the host army for the isolated contingents from the Continent. New arms, better officers and more technical schools, and the periodic attachment of Allied ground forces to larger British units were crucial to the professional progress of soldiers in Britain starting in 1942. An Anglo-American exchange program with some similarities and the same result of better joint effectiveness through mutual understanding was conducted in 1943 and 1944. Integration of the exiles into Royal Air Force and Royal Navy operations was very effective after lingering British fears from 1940 of low morale, poor discipline and questionable loyalty were overcome. Bitterness over the voluntary French military repatriation from Britain after the Franco-German armistice in June 1940 continued to linger, however. An Air Ministry report in late 1942 criticised many of the Free French for lukewarm support of democracy and for only thinking of their own narrow national interests. 13

Besides severe communications problems during the May 1940 campaign in Belgium, the biggest shortcoming of the British in Belgian military affairs concerned the Congo. The War Office and Admiralty tempted fate by delays and partially-filled orders of armaments to protect the mouth of the Congo River. One or two enemy submarines or surface raiders could easily have done lasting damage

¹² Churchill, War, 646, 867-8, 887, 892; Polish AFA, Destiny, 349. British troops were also available to intervene in Brussels in Nov 1944, if communist-led armed demonstrators had overwhelmed Belgian authorities. (Chapter VI, Part 2).

 $^{^{13}}$ Reynolds, Relations, 335; PREM 3/43: 43 (W.P. (40) 281, 22 Jul 40); AIR 2/8238 (Rpt 23 to CAB, Oct-Dec 1942).

to the ports and shipping that handled important raw materials going to Britain and North America. Concerning the Force Publique, the War Office was understandably reluctant to complicate operations and stretch scarce resources in Africa and the Middle East by adding a new nationality to the forces already there. However, once the Belgian colonial forces were incorporated into British-led operations, they should have been given more prominence. If Force Publique achievements in part of the campaign against the Italians in Abyssinia had been given more credit by the British, perhaps the Belgians would have added more European officers and sergeants to their colonial forces in time for a useful supporting role in the 8th Army campaign of 1942-1943 against Rommel. Even this speculative role became nearly impossible once the Axis was driven out of Africa. Weather, racial attitudes and German prowess defending Europe made active operations there unjustifiable for the Force Publique. 14

When reaching conclusions about the Belgian side of the wartime relationship between Britain and Belgium, it is important to remember that the exiles as individuals, government ministers and military members naturally had different perspectives from their hosts. Belgian civilians were grateful for their refuge in Britain from German tyranny, and the overwhelming majority of those eligible worked in British industry. British volunteer agencies and friends helped the exiles establish a new life, and Belgian social services, schools and clubs continued to support the exile community. Probably the greatest complaint from this group was the delay until mid-1945 in going home after Belgium was liberated in September 1944. It is possible that starting a small, but steady, flow after the Allied armies moved eastward in early 1945 would have helped ease some of the pressure, especially if personal reports of harsh living conditions in Belgium were sent back to friends still in exile. Part of the blame for food and coal shortages in Belgium must fall on the

 $^{^{14}}$ WO 106/2892: 33A (CinC W. Africa to WO, 9 Mar 42). Burma had also been considered and dismissed as a combat theatre for the Force Publique.

British and Americans, who greatly underestimated Belgium's need for imported food after being liberated. 15

At the inter-government level, the Belgian governments under Hubert Pierlot worked hard from 1940 to 1945 to gain British appreciation of his government's efforts for the Allied coalition. A handicap that was not his fault was the First World War myth of "brave little Belgium" and heroic King Albert I that was impossible to live up to, especially after the May 1940 surrender of King Leopold III. In addition to the contrast noted by Churchill between British sacrifices in Flanders during the First World War and the apparent ingratitude of Belgium from late 1939 to mid-1940, the Belgians had to contend with other British judgments, such as the PWE feeling that the Roman Catholic cardinal and the Brussels burgomaster of 1941 did not measure up to their predecessors of 1914.16

Pierlot did have more control over other factors in his relations with the British after his belated arrival in London in October 1940. His stiff personality and inadequate English skills, as well as his lengthy refusal to expand his government, made forming a good working relationship with his hosts more difficult. His strong pursuit of Belgian national interests concerning propaganda, food, links with the Resistance and the use of resources from the Congo was often irritating to the British, especially since other Allied premiers were also trying to get equal favours from their host on behalf of their countries. Concern about concessions to one exile government being demanded by others caused the British to be cautious or secretive about granting favours, especially since it might also cause problems with the United States. The success of the Belgian Purchasing Commission in New York, the food parcel service to Belgium from Lisbon, above-average social benefits for exiles in Britain, and

¹⁵ Donnison, Civil Affairs, 326.

¹⁶ FO 898/231: 44 (PWE plan, 3 Dec 41). Churchill's praise of the "shining example" given by the Belgian queen mother and her late husband (Albert) in the First World War was a memory that their son (Leopold) would have had trouble matching even in the best of times. Churchill, CHAR 20/227A (WSC to Queen Elisabeth, 1 Jun 45).

the poor compliance of the Belgian Congo with Allied rationing guidelines made it easier to understand British irritation and reluctance when Pierlot asked for even more concessions. Pierlot's desire to increase relief to Belgium in spite of the blockade was natural, but the excesses of the life style in the Congo could probably have been curbed.¹⁷

The Belgian government in exile let the morale problems in the isolated Belgian exile army fester for too long. Gutt, the first exile Minister of National Defence, had mediocre health and was overwhelmed with financial duties. An opportune time for Pierlot to take over defence duties, especially supervision of the army, was in July 1941, when the 1st Fusilier Battalion moved from Tenby and the 2nd Fusilier Battalion and depot was created. He could have helped General van Strijdonck curb the disruptive royalist influence that spread under the new ground forces commander, General Daufresne. By the time Pierlot did become Minister of National Defence in October 1942, unnecessary damage to army morale and discipline had been done. At the same time, Henri Rolin concluded his eight-month term as an ineffective Undersecretary of State for Defence. As acting defence minister in July 1942, he had proved his weak grasp of military matters by writing directly to Churchill to urge starting a "second front" in the west as soon as possible, in order to improve the morale of bored and frustrated Allied soldiers. 18

The other military matter that was poorly handled by the Pierlot government was the use of the Force Publique. It seemed that the Force was expected to garner national prestige for the Belgians from early 1941 to early 1944 when the ground forces in Britain were not able to. However, the Belgians were unwilling to invest enough European personnel as officers and sergeants to make the Force

 $^{^{17}}$ FO 371/32475: W13855 (Halifax to FO, 15 Oct; FO (Steel), 19-22 Oct 42); Medlicott, $Blockade,\ 1:\ 551-2,\ 576-7.$

¹⁸ Rolin was under pressure from fellow Socialists in the BPO to help relieve the pressure on the Russians from German attacks on the Eastern Front. FO 123/558 (BritEmbB (Aveling), 30 Jul 42).

Publique more effective in warfare requiring use of more advanced weapons. If substantial Belgian manpower and money had been used to upgrade the Force Publique in 1941 and 1942, they might have been able to support actively the invasion of Madagas ar in September 1942 or the defence of Egypt from June to October 1942. Garrison duty, or possibly logistics support by a few specialised units, was inevitable for the Belgian colonial forces after the Mediterranean front moved to mainland Europe in mid-1943. Rather than train specialists or rotate personnel from Britain or the Congo, the Belgian government let the Force Publique stagnate. Relief for the bored European cadre came in mid-1944, when they could volunteer to join the Belgian army in Britain. 19

The Belgian Congo was the most important asset that the Pierlot government brought to the Allied war effort from 1940 to 1944. Belgians did well in supporting the Allied war effort by increasing and diversifying their production of raw materials. The government was generally successful in getting powerful private companies to reorient their prewar priorities and operations based on established commercial needs in Belgium in order to meet the broader and changing demands of the Anglo-American war effort. One example of this was the increased production of less profitable items such as rubber for Britain. The establishment and refinement of tripartite committees that coordinated the production, pricing and distribution of raw material among the Belgian, American and British governments was only possible because of strong pressure from Pierlot's ministers and Pierre Ryckmans, the experienced Governor-General of the Belgian Congo. Production in the Congo gave the Belgian government a large reserve of gold and currency, and provided vital sources of industrial diamonds, copal gum and copper in particular.20

¹⁹ FO 123/558 (WO to Wouters, 16 Sep 42; FO to Carlisle, 27 Nov 42). Mercer, *Chronicle*, 332-4. Any substantial increased training or movement of Force Publique personnel would only have been possible by diversion of scarce instructors and transport.

 $^{^{20}}$ CAB 115/732 (Harrison to Fraser, 1 Jan 44); ABTJ 31 (1944): 51; AVIA 22/3191: 50 (FO to Shepherd, 7 Apr 44).

Perhaps the interaction between the Belgian government in London and the leaders in the Congo would have been smoother if a less overbearing and possessive person had been the Minister of Colonies instead of Albert de Vleeschauwer. His zeal for the Allied cause was important in dealing with rebellious officers and attentiste business leaders in the Congo during the first two years of the war, but even his fellow ministers eventually agreed that he should let Governor-General Ryckmans carry more of the workload and responsibility for actions affecting the Congo. Had that happened, perhaps Ryckmans could have implemented his wish in late 1942 to move some Force Publique personnel back into production of raw materials. This would have prevented their being wasted in the London government's chase for military glory. Another helpful change in the interaction between the authorities in London and Leopoldville would have been to make earlier and more frequent use of distinguished but pleasant representatives from London, such as Paul Tschoffen, who had a successful two-month visit to the Congo in late 1943.21

The immediate postliberation period in Belgium was an extrapolation of the exile in Britain for Pierlot and his ministers, and confirmed the achievements and limitations of a government that had been physically separated from its electorate for over four years. Pierlot was chosen premier again in September 1944 because there were no other candidates with adequate experience in government and the necessary support in parliament. A third of his cabinet of 19 men had been in exile in Britain, and it should not have been a surprise that they were partially overwhelmed by the crushing burden of trying to solve so many problems at once. This does not completely excuse Pierlot's inadequate leadership, especially since he might have made better use of advisors and men who had experienced the German occupation. For example, his deputy prime minister should have been someone who had stayed in Belgium, instead of the exiled Auguste de Schrijver. When five of his ministers were singled out

 $^{^{21}}$ FO 425/421: C224 (Shepherd to Eden, 21 Dec 42), /422: C11484 (Ledger to Eden, 16 Aug 44).

for their ineffectiveness, perhaps he could have found replacements instead of keeping them to the detriment of his government. Since Pierlot's relations with the mostly Socialist BPO had been strained in London, he was probably less able to use their connections among the many left-wing leaders in Belgium. Even those connections might not have helped much, as leadership among the Socialists and other parties shifted after national liberation to those who had stayed in Belgium. It was also an opportune time for the "next generation" to take over in Belgium; Van Acker was 47 years old when he replaced Pierlot, who was his senior by 15 years.²²

Pierlot's last government did have some major accomplishments, however. Gutt's currency reforms were effective in reducing inflation and in punishing war profiteers, and most were continued even after he left office in February 1945. Another helpful action for the national economy was the Anglo-Belgian Monetary Agreement of 5 October 1944, which complemented the bold Belgium-Netherlands-Luxembourg Customs Union Agreement signed a month earlier. He also improved the Belgian Army by expanding the Piron Brigade, creating many new fusilier battalions, and tripling the number of Belgian commando troops. Pierlot faithfully met his reverse lend-lease obligations to the Allied armies in Belgium, even if it increased shortages for his own citizens. Some Foreign Office staff members noted that Belgium got too little credit for its domestic achievements and generous support to the Allied armies. Instead, they felt that Belgium should have been used in many ways as "a model to our other allies."23

The SHAEF Mission (Belgium) was slow to realise how much help with imported food the Belgians needed, but it worked hard in late 1944 and early 1945 to alleviate shortages. Pierlot's successor as

²² Hasquin, *Dictionnaire*, 378, 469. Only 3 of the 9 Belgian governments between Feb 1945 and Apr 1954 were headed by London exiles (2 by Spaak, 1 by Huysmans; both were Socialists). Huyse, *Répression*, 311-3.

²³ FO 371/38899: C17641 (FO (Harrison & Roberts), 9 Dec 44).

premier, Achille Van Acker, reaped most of the benefits of Allied food aid. The Chief of the Mission, Maj Gen George Erskine, gave the Pierlot government strong support at the critical moment of the communist-led unrest in November 1944, and the general used his civil affairs detachments with vigour to help the Ardennes after the German invasion of December 1944. Overall, General Erskine was an effective representative to the Belgian government for the Allied high command.²⁴

A few final comments are necessary to put the fall of the last Pierlot government in February 1945 into a Belgian perspective. Belgian governments were short-lived before and after the Second World War because of fractious Belgian politics and the necessity for coalition governments. Neither the fall nor the short tenure of Pierlot's government was unusual in Belgium. In the chaotic and dangerous period between September 1944 and February 1945, Belgium needed a strong central government such as Churchill's in Britain. However, that was not possible in a country that had strong and ancient traditions of local autonomy, had developed a habit of resisting central authority during the German occupation, and had many lower-level officials who lacked the motivation or ability to implement difficult changes. 25 It is therefore doubtful whether another Belgian prime minister and government would have done much better, or lasted much longer, under the same circumstances. Comparisons with Pierlot's closest foreign contemporaries in exile are not helpful, as the exiled prime ministers of the Netherlands (Gerbrandy) and Norway (Nygaardsvold) and their governments were replaced immediately after their repatriation in May 1945 by

²⁴ The basic daily food ration in Belgium was 1650 calories under Pierlot, and fell to 1430 calories in Feb 1945. Van Acker was able to raise that ration to 1838 calories in Apr 1945 with Allied food. WO 220/108: 21B & 35B (SHAEF/G5 to WO, 16 Feb & 14 Apr 45)

²⁵ Mallinson, Belgium, 103-6; Huyse, Répression, 311-3; FO 371/48974: Z64 (SHAEF (Belgium) Rpt 6, 15 Dec 44).

caretaker regimes until national elections could be held.26

In the final analysis, the relationship between Britain and the Belgian exiles was important and successful. Britain got access to the many resources of the Belgian Congo, some of them very difficult to get elsewhere. The Allied armies also got an invaluable support base with a helpful population and resources to help them launch a final offensive into Germany in early 1945. Without the full cooperation of the Pierlot government, Allied access to such resources would have been much more difficult and at the probable cost of inefficiency, diminished assets and ill will. Nonetheless, Britain could have been part of a winning Allied coalition without active Belgian help.

The Belgian exiles got a friendly refuge and the opportunity to keep their national cause alive through their legal government and retention of national assets. The Belgian Congo increased its potential through exploitation of more resources and international trade. The Pierlot government was able to maintain the integrity of Belgian authority on the world stage, control many national resources and improve Belgium's chances of postwar security with international agreements. The Belgians could not have continued a strong national resistance and rebuilt their military forces without active help in Britain, especially during 1940 and 1941.²⁷

There was also an important postwar benefit to the Anglo-Belgian experience. Those involved in the wartime partnership between Britain and Belgium were determined that the benefits of their victory would not be wasted after the Second World War, as they had been a quarter-century before. The British ambassador to Belgium

²⁶ FO 238/306: 28 (Netherlands Press Agency, 25 May 45); Dik Lehmkuhl, Journey to London: The Story of the Norwegian Government at War (London: Hutchinson, 1945), 138, 142. Gerbrandy wanted to quit in exile after yet another cabinet squabble in Jan 1945, but there was no acceptable replacement. De Jong, "Government," Holland, 10.

²⁷ The neutrality of the United States during 1940-41 and its "melting pot" approach to foreigners would have precluded a full Belgian government and military forces from being based there. The Congo and Canada were too far away from Europe to manage aid and communications with Belgium, while Portugal was strongly neutral.

stated that the war had taught his country that aloofness and isolation from the affairs of Europe was not safe, and he noted that Belgium had learned that neutrality did not bring security. Paul-Henri Spaak, perennial Belgian foreign minister, told his parliament the same things in different words:

To Great Britain we owe in large measure our independence in 1830, our recovered freedom in 1918 and our miraculous liberation in 1944. This impressive series of decisive and happy interventions allows us to declare today, with more emphasis than ever, that the essential continuing factor in our foreign policy is British friendship.²⁹

The practice of Anglo-Belgian cooperation has been modified in scope and format since the Second World War by cultural differences, changing times and new personalities. However, these slight shifts in national perspectives have not affected the shared pride of old veterans, or the warm memories of hospitality in each other's country during the exile of the Belgians and after the Anglo-American liberation of Belgium. Their experience and understanding of mutual generosity, joint benefits and constructive cooperation to make a better future a reality must be comprehended and absorbed by their descendants. Preserving such hard-won wisdom will help to prevent a major war in the future, and would be the best tribute to those in Britain and Belgium who sacrificed so much between 1940 and 1945.

²⁸ Times, 18 May 44.

²⁹ FO 425/422: C17486 (Knatchbull-Hugessen to Eden, 9 Dec 44). Spaak also grew as a postwar leader to become one of the "fathers of modern Europe" through work in the Council of Europe, Common Market and NATO. Hasquin, *Dictionnaire*, 440.

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