Introduction

Eighteen days of *Blitzkrieg* in May 1940 sufficed for Germany to sweep away Belgian independence for a second time in a generation. As the soldiers disarmed, the refugees returned from France, and the government settled down in London, control of the small country that more than eight million people called home was taken over by Militärbefehlshaber General Alexander von Falkenhausen. It was the onset of more than four long years of hunger, want, humiliation, and fear. Occupied Belgium was forced to put its industrial production at the disposal of the German war effort while receiving little in return. Growing scarcity gave rise to an increasingly strict regimen of rationing and a black market in which prices in 1943 were eighteen times higher than at the start of the occupation. In the cities and industrial areas ever more people were going hungry. In October 1942 the German authorities caused another shock wave when they announced that henceforth Belgians could be shipped off to Germany as forced laborers. Despite loud protests and mass evasion, almost 200,000 Belgians failed to escape this fate. Some 3,200 would never return from the German factories, mostly as a result of Allied bombardments. Meanwhile, the racist and totalitarian regime continued to perfect the mechanisms aimed at removing anyone labeled misfit or opponent. Of the approximately 56,000 Jews registered by the Germans in Belgium, some 25,000 (including almost 4,200 children) were put on convoys to camps in the east. No more than 5 percent of the deportees survived the ordeal. A multitude of military and Nazi security forces also chased down anyone involved in the resistance. The hunt accelerated in July 1944, when the military governor was replaced by civilian Reichskommissar and Nazi faithful Josef Grohé, who unleashed collaborating militias. Of the 30,000 members of the resistance caught by the Germans during the occupation, a total of 15,000 were executed or sent to their deaths in prisons and camps.[1]

[1] Van den Wijngaert et al., *België*, 49–50, 69, 82–4, 103, 108, 167, 169, and 293.

The summer of 1944 was one of hope as well as terror. After weeks of bitter fighting following the long-awaited Allied invasion on June 6, the liberating armies in August at last broke free from their shackles in the Norman hedgerow country. The speed with which they now pursued the Germans in the direction of Paris and Belgium was astounding. On August 25, Allied troops took control of the French capital and crossed the Seine. On September 2, Belgians were stunned to hear the BBC announce that the first liberators had already set foot on their own soil near Tournai. The whirlwind advance of the Allies beat anything the Germans had demonstrated in May 1940. At dusk on September 3, British spearheads from Hainaut were already finding their way into the Belgian capital. The day after, they rushed headlong into the crucial port of Antwerp. With that they had effectively cleaved through the heart of Belgium and sliced the small country in two. British, Canadian, and Polish troops fanned out west of the main axis to push the German XVth Army out of Belgium. British troops also continued their rapid advance east of Antwerp and Brussels towards Leuven and Diest, the Kempen, and northern Limburg. Meanwhile, American troops rushed to pursue what remained of the mauled VIIth Army east of the main axis, capturing close to 30,000 Germans in the Mons pocket, reaching Liège and Hasselt on September 7, and setting first foot on German soil five days later. If the Germans had taken only eighteen days to inflict a humiliating defeat on Belgium, the Allies had needed no more than ten days of combat to chase the tormentors from most of the country. The Germans did manage to put up a fight north of Antwerp and the Albert Canal until October, and in a pocket around Knokke in northern West Flanders province until early November. But such resistance could not lessen among troops and civilians a sense of immense relief about the comparatively minimal losses and damage with which the liberation of Belgium had been accomplished at lightning speed.[2]

All this, as much as the satisfaction of having regained their freedom, explains why Belgians across most of the country received their liberators amidst chaotic scenes of joy and gratitude so intense they would impress many an Allied commander and soldier for the rest of their lives. It probably also goes a long way towards explaining why much of the literature on the liberation of Belgium has traditionally focused on the stunning military feats of the Allies and why the memories of the liberated are often content to linger on the initial euphoria and the clichés of chewing gum

[2] Ibid., 267–71 and www.60jaar.be/nl/liberation/history/history2.html. Last accessed on June 8, 2005.

and chocolate. They would almost have us believe that, after the cheers and kisses in September 1944, the Allied armies packed up, moved on to Nazi Germany, and vanished from Belgium altogether, allowing the country to get back to normal all by itself. The reality was, however, that as long as the campaign against neighboring Germany continued, there remained a mass presence of Allied troops in Belgium. Indeed, even when Germany was defeated in May 1945, pulling out troops and equipment took time, so that even by the spring of 1946 a significant number of Allied soldiers remained on Belgian soil.[3]

That this presence of a large body of foreign troops, on the heels of a traumatic enemy occupation of more than four years, was likely to pose complex legal, political, and social challenges had, of course, been uppermost in the minds of those involved in planning the liberation of Belgium. On May 16, 1944, representatives of the Belgian, British, and American governments concluded an agreement on the civil administration and jurisdiction in Belgian territory liberated by an Allied Expeditionary Force. The agreement stipulated that during military operations in Belgium, the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied forces would exercise "supreme" responsibility and authority. As soon as this military phase had passed, however, the Belgian government would be allowed to resume full control over the civil administration and to enact laws, as long as this did not in any way prejudice the use by Allied forces of ports, airfields, lines of communications, and other facilities vital for the prosecution of the war. It was agreed also that the Allied Commander-in-Chief would have the power to requisition billets and supplies and make use of lands, buildings, transportation, and other services for military needs. The terms of the agreement made it clear that the jurisdiction over all members of the Allied soldiers belonged exclusively to Allied service authorities and courts, although the local police forces were allowed to arrest and detain soldiers who committed offenses against Belgian law until they could be handed over to the appropriate Allied service authority. On the other hand, however, Belgian courts were given jurisdiction over civilians alleged to have committed offenses against the persons, property, and security of the Allied forces, albeit on the important condition that these ensured speedy trials. Another

[3] Apart from some excellent local research (Sulbout on Liège, for example, and the seminar papers on Walloon Brabant written by students under the supervision of Professor Jacques Lory), notable exceptions in the general literature are studies by Conway (mainly limited to the Allied presence insofar as it impacts the Belgian political scene), De Vos (a brief synthesis on the presence of American troops), Hardenne (a brief synthesis of Allied–civilian relations without notes about the sources), and Pauwels (an excellent work on the smaller contingent of Canadian forces). On the Allied troop presence as late as 1946, see de Pinchart, *Office d'Aide Mutuelle*, 7, 8, and 16.

important decision that would do much to smooth relations between liberators and liberated was the establishment of claims commissions. These were to be created by the respective Allies with a view to treating claims for compensation in cases of damage or injury to civilians committed by Allied forces, with the important exception of those resulting from operations against the enemy.

On September 8, 1944, in the wake of the Allied armies, Belgian Prime Minister Hubert Pierlot and his government returned to Brussels after more than four years of exile in London, making Belgium the first liberated country with a restored constitutional government. Two days later, British Major-General George Erskine arrived in the Belgian capital. He and his American adjunct, Colonel John Sherman, formally established the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force Mission to Belgium, which took control of Allied affairs at the national level. The Allied Mission included a Civil Affairs staff that was to handle all problems of national scope. At the same time, British and American forces created Civil Affairs detachments at provincial and local levels, which were to act as their eyes and ears, to encourage good relations, to coordinate efforts with the local administration, and to aid the Belgians wherever possible by providing food, medical supplies, and transportation.[4]

The Civil Affairs agreement of May 1944 had assigned an important role also to the so-called Mission Militaire Belge. This Mission was appointed by the Belgian government in London and was to act as a liaison between the Allied military command and Belgian authorities. The first of its three sections consisted of a purely military liaison staff. The second concerned itself with matters pertaining to civil affairs and administrative and economic reconstruction. The third section was by far the most powerful as it comprised the Haut Commissariat à la Sécurité de l'État, which the Belgian government had already called into being as early as July 1943 with an eye to ensuring law and order as soon as the national territory had been liberated. The logical choice for the person to head the Haut Commissariat was Walter Ganshof van der Meersch. After all, in his capacity of Auditeur Général, van der Meersch was already in control of Belgium's military tribunals, the very tribunals that not only were to hear the cases against suspected Nazi collaborators, but also the charges against civilians presumed to have committed offences against the Allied forces. As Haut Commissaire, van der

[4] Delbrück, "International Law and Military Forces Abroad," 86; Donnison, *Civil Affairs*, 37–40, 111–19, and 469–71; and De Vos, "US Forces," 181–3.

Meersch had officers stationed in all of the nine provinces, where they served as his and the Belgian government's eyes and ears.[5]

This book combines the highly confidential sources of the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force Mission to Belgium, the Haut Commissariat à la Sécurité de l'État, and the Belgian military tribunals with the countless written and visual testimonies of the liberated and the myriad densely textured histories put together by local and amateur researchers. In doing so, the book goes beyond the euphoria of the first days to reveal in great detail the largely unknown history of Belgium's liberation era. The structure for this history consists of six chapters and an epilogue that each have a distinct theme.

The first two chapters describe how the humiliating retreat of the once invincible Germans and the often clumsy interventions of the Belgian resistance in open warfare set the tone for the wholehearted embrace of the Allied armies and their astounding might.

A third chapter analyzes the carnivalesque reception and celebrations as well as the first Belgian impressions of the Anglo-American liberators and the exciting new worlds they represented (the small contingent of Polish liberators are outside the scope of this book). The fourth chapter focuses on the dark side of the first days of liberation, when people, in often horrific rituals of branding and cleansing, set out to exorcize anyone and anything reminding them of Germany's failed and loathed New Order.

Chapter Five demonstrates how the initial perceptions of the Allies evolved and matured as the population had increasing opportunities to get to know the liberators better in 1944 and 1945. It pays particular attention to the means by which the Allies attempted to breed trust as governors in uniform and how, as ambassadors in uniform, they came to showcase their respective countries, the latter above all in terms of material abundance and the popular culture of film and music.

But if Chapter Five confirms the waves of admiration that continue to form the basic texture of today's dominant popular memory of the liberators, a sizeable Chapter Six provides this book with a significant revisionist twist by laying bare strong yet largely forgotten currents of discontent. These formed not only a permanent nagging concern for Allied and Belgian authorities alike, but during the winter of 1944–5 in effect threatened to undermine the legitimacy of the Allied presence in the eyes of the liberated, and in the summer of 1945 again did much to harm relations between troops and civilians.

[5] Laureys, "Le Personnel du HCSE: Un profil socioprofessionel," 267–8.

Finally, despite the strong currents of discontent that the mass presence of Allied troops gave rise to in 1944–5, the countries and cultures they represented did not fail to exert substantial attraction and influence. The epilogue considers the lingering impact of the Anglo-Americans on Belgian society beyond their immediate presence as liberators. And it does so by reflecting on the growing cult of abundance, the erosion of traditional authority, and the emergence of an American world order, all of which would set the tone for the remainder of the turbulent twentieth century.

Part I

The big void

1 The sun sets

The German troops steamrolling the Low Countries in May 1940 had so impressed the population that in one powerful drawing that month, a political cartoonist had likened them to a giant futuristic robot clanking its way through the gently rolling countryside. During the tortuous years that followed the shock invasion, the Nazi occupiers had proved themselves as zealous and efficient as they were unforgiving. In the late summer of 1944, however, these images of the Germans as haughty and invincible, built up over a period of more than four years, were wiped away in less than four weeks.[1]

The end is near

Sure enough, the last spasms of the occupiers' power stretched into the final weeks before the liberation. The dreaded call-ups for forced labor in Germany, for example, continued unabated throughout much of the summer of 1944. And even on the last day of August, German agents were staging raids in Brussels to get hold of young men who had refused to report to the occupying authorities and gone underground. Even so, the portents of the Nazi regime's imminent demise were becoming unmistakably clear that same summer. People carefully tracked the advances of the Anglo-Americans from Normandy and the Soviets from the east. They strained their necks to catch glimpses of the ever-growing formations of bombers on their way to the Nazi homeland. And they prayed in their basements each time the intensifying Allied air raids threatened to pound railroads and bridges close to their own homes.[2]

By the middle of August 1944, public life in much of Belgium was grinding to a halt. Retreating German convoys poured in from France and monopolized the roads. Enemy troops requisitioned schools and

[1] Leo Jordaan created the cartoon, which appeared as "De Robot" in *De Groene Amsterdammer*.
[2] Neckers, *Bevrijding*, 24; and Balace, "Bruxelles," 59.

other large buildings to get much-needed rest. Allied fighter-bombers, on their part, pounced on any vehicle on the move, thus adding to the chaos and congestion. By the end of August, textile factories in Verviers, for example, were forced to close their doors because raw materials stopped getting through. Provisioning became a growing problem for consumers in communities large and small. In the town of Leopoldsburg not a single bakery remained open early in September, and even milk was hard to come by. People in the capital stood in line for ever scarcer bread and vegetables, seeking shelter against houses each time German anti-aircraft batteries opened up and shrapnel rained down. On the first day of September, the telephone and telegraph lines in Verviers went dead. The town's newspaper stopped appearing the following day. During the next few days, Verviers discontinued its mail service and brought its trams to a halt. In Bruges on September 3, 1944, German authorities ordered all cafés closed at 6 p.m. with a curfew setting in two hours later.[3]

The Germans showed signs of increasing nervousness. For fear of the resistance lobbing hand grenades at them, the *Feldgendarme* in Comines thought it wise to put bars on their headquarters' windows early in August. A month later, German authorities in Brussels decided it was safer to have all Belgian policemen and gendarmes hand in their arms. Similar disarmaments took place across the country, and Germans everywhere were now frisking men they thought looked even remotely suspicious. To ensure that the population in the capital would remain docile, the occupier arrested several high-ranking officials and declared them hostages. On September 4, the German Kommandantur in the Flemish city of Ghent put up posters to announce a curfew as well as a ban on gatherings in the streets of more than two people. In contrast to the many *Bekanntmachungen* that had preceded it during four long years of occupation, this announcement was no longer printed in stern black letters. It had been scribbled in pencil and in a hurry.[4]

Getting ready

The Germans had serious reasons to be in a hurry. The devastating effect that the Allied juggernaut was having on the enemy first became clear to the Belgians in the form of endless hospital trains pulling into their stations from France. Packed together like sardines, casualties of

[3] Wynants, *Verviers*, 1–8; Bours, *Limburg*, 91; Banneux, "Souvenirs," August 28–September 3, 1944, AB 712; and Warnier, *Brugge bevrijd*, 12.
[4] Vierstraete et al., "Comines-Warneton," 492 and 506; Balace, "Bruxelles," 61–2; and Marchal, *Gent*, 19.

close combat and the pursuing fighter-bombers (*Jabos* as the Germans called the dreaded aircraft) arrived in carriages and boxcars that had Red Cross symbols painted on roofs and sides. The numbers soon exceeded hospital capacity, and in response the Germans requisitioned large buildings everywhere. In Lovenjoel near Leuven even the fragile women inhabiting a spacious mental home had to be evacuated to make room. Early in September, the fire-brigade siren in Duffel woke the Belgian Red Cross personnel in the dead of night. Agitated German soldiers ordered the sleep-drunk nurses to the local station. A long train screeched to a halt. The Red Cross staff gasped and gagged when the heavy doors of the boxcars were thrown open. Soldiers lay heaped together on a thin layer of straw. Some were thrashing about and screaming with pain, others barely seemed to be breathing. Puss seeped from filthy casts and bandages. Fearful of imminent *Jabo* attacks, the Germans on the platform barked at the nurses to transport their comrades to a nearby convent. The staff scurried to obey. They loaded the unfortunates into decrepit trucks and horse wagons. Some of the wounded had to make the trip on push carts. One of the nurses cried as she listened to the soldiers moan and beg with each jolt on the long cobblestone road.[5]

German authorities in Belgium meanwhile were readying more trains to facilitate their own retreat. Administrative personnel began pouring out of Brussels on August 29. The last train reserved for noncombatant personnel pulled out of the capital's station two days later, its carriages filled with hundreds of administrative officers, clerks, and telephone operators. Gauleiter Grohé, head of the Zivilverwaltung, called it quits on August 30. Richard Jungclaus, commander of the Wehrmacht, SS, and police, followed suit almost immediately. But he did not do so before drawing up a statement in which he urged the Belgian population to form a united front against both "the terrorists" (the occupier's preferred name for the resistance) and "the armies of the slaves of American imperialism."[6]

In cities and towns across Belgium similar scenes were repeated as more administrative personnel loaded files and office furniture onto trains and trucks. Hospitals too eventually had to be evacuated. In Leuven alone the Kriegslazarett housed more than 1,000 wounded soldiers. Those with light wounds left on foot. The others boarded green buses that had come all the way from Paris. Fearful collaborators from the Dutch- and French-speaking parts of the country joined the chaotic exodus or hurriedly organized their own convoys destined for Germany. Some of the enemy had been stationed in Belgium too long to bear the thought of leaving. The police in Leuven reported the case of a German

[5] De Vos, *Bevrijding*, 43; and Schilders, "Duffel," AB 122.
[6] Balace, "Bruxelles," 59–60.