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BELGIUM

CHAPTER I

THE PLACE OF BELGIUM IN EUROPE

This chapter describes the geography of the Southern Netherlands, which form the modern Belgian Kingdom, and their peculiar position in Europe. It traces historically the influence of geography upon the political and economic development of the people.

The area of Belgium is 11,775 square miles, that is, about one and a half times the extent of Wales; its population, according to the latest estimate (31 December 1941), was 8,257,392, which is rather less than that of 'Greater London'. The land and the people of this small, thickly populated country fall into two parts, fairly clearly differentiated.

FLANDERS AND WALLONIA. There is the flat land of the west and north, in which the Flemings predominate; and there are the rolling downs, rising in the south-east to the wooded hills and deep valleys of the Ardennes and the forests of Luxembourg, in which French, or the Walloon dialect of it, is spoken. Brussels, the capital, is on the borderline; and more than half of the 912,000 citizens of 'Greater Brussels' now speak Flemish. The slow-flowing Scheldt (Escaut), with its tributaries and connected canals, is the chief river of Flanders. It is the swifter Meuse (Maas), flowing from Northern France past Dinant,

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Namur and Liège into Holland, which is the main waterway of Wallonia. The valleys of the Meuse and its tributary, the Sambre, saw in very early times the rise of metal crafts: since the development of the coal fields the metallurgical industry of Liège has become one of the most important in Europe.

Who were the original Belgae, of whose valour Julius Cæsar writes, is disputed by historians. The Roman occupation lasted for four centuries and left, especially in the long straight roads, and the villas and castra, to which many of the mediaeval towns owed their sites, as profound an influence as did the occupation of Britain. But before the decline of the Roman civilization there was already a steady infiltration of Germanic tribes. This began upon a considerable scale in the fourth century A.D.

While deforestation went on under the Romans, there remained, according to tradition, a wide band of forest, stretching from Picardy in the west to the modern Brussels and beyond. It is certain at least that the famous *Forêt Charbonnière*, so called because the Romans used it on a large scale to make charcoal for their forges, existed until the Middle Ages between the Scheldt, the Dendre and the Sambre. It was chiefly between these great woods and the sea that the Frisians and Saxons made their settlements, that is, in the area corresponding to the Netherlands of to-day, the Belgian provinces of West and East Flanders, Antwerp and Limbourg and the north of Brabant, and the modern French Departments of the Nord and the Pas de Calais.¹

¹ Despite the persistent endeavour to replace Flemish by French, ever since the conquests of Louis XIV, nearly three centuries ago, many of the country people of these

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These are the areas in which Dutch or Flemish, which is a Low German language, are spoken to-day.

Within the forest belt, of which only a few traces remain, and in the Ardennes, the Gallic-Roman civilization was better able to survive. Up to the forest barrier and into the valleys swarmed the Franks; and by the ninth century the eastern part of modern Belgium and the Rhineland had become the centre of the Carolingian Empire. Charles the Great made his capital at Aachen. It is possible that the differences between the immigrant German tribes, and the varying degrees in which they assimilated the Roman civilization, may provide a remote explanation for the fact, that Flemish developed as the popular language of the coastal plains while French, by the thirteenth century at least, had become the basic language of the south and east. But the exact borderline between the two languages would be difficult to determine any time before the beginning of the nineteenth century. The use of Flemish or Dutch was more widespread, than it now is, before the eighteenth century when French became, even under Austrian rule, the language of Government as well as of cultured society through-

two Departments still speak a bastard Flemish. It may be heard, loud enough, in the market at Calais; and it was possible a few years ago to hear a Flemish sermon in a village church within sight of Dunkirk. Indeed parish priests in the diocese of Lille are obliged to provide Flemish-speaking confessors for their parishioners, if they cannot speak the language themselves. Such facts, no doubt, account for the Nazi policy of attaching, as they have done, the Departments of the Nord and the Pas de Calais to Belgium for administrative purposes: they are under the Military Governor at Brussels, General von Falkenhausen.

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out the Netherlands. Probably two facts account more than anything else for the survival of Flemish in the parts where it flourishes to-day. They are, the comparative integrity of the county of Flanders, despite the incessant dynastic wars, up to the thirteenth century; and, thereafter, the conservatism of the Flemish towns, which stuck obstinately to their rights and traditions and fought for them against a variety of foreign overlords, Burgundian, Spanish and Austrian.

While the hilly country of the south-east can be described as the beginning of the Alpine foot-hills, the plain of Belgian Flanders and the Netherlands was, doubtless, originally formed by the silt, washed down by the Rhine and its tributaries from the mountain mass of Central Europe. The Rhine itself shares a common estuary with the Scheldt and the Meuse. Through these river-mouths, with their tangle of islands, sandbanks, and channels, passed the greater part of the sea-borne trade of the German lands, from the earliest days of recorded history, a trade which the great ports of Antwerp and Rotterdam were to dispute in later centuries.

WAR WITH THE SEA. Holland is almost a man-made country, saved from the unending menace of the sea by a defensive system of dykes and dams, enclosing polders of reclaimed land. This has, on a smaller scale, been the history of West Flanders from Calais to the mouth of the Scheldt. The sand dunes have come to form a natural barrier against the inroads of the sea, but they have had to be reinforced throughout history with special grasses to hold them; and an elaborate system of canals, with their

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lock-gates regulating the water levels, at once provides abundant transport and prevents inundation.

The drying of the ground and the building of dams began at the end of the Norman invasions of the tenth century, though for three centuries the coast-line was often changed and villages blotted out by appalling storms, the worst of which, 'The Great Storm', formed the Zuyder Zee in the thirteenth century. The Grand Place of Ypres is 50 ft. below sea-level; and, by blowing up the lock-gates at Nieuport in October 1914, the Belgian Army was able to flood a wide stretch of country almost as far inland as Ypres, and so save a fragment of Belgium and Dunkirk from the oncoming Germans. To-day there are just 1,000 miles of navigable waterways in Belgium. Bruges, Ghent and Brussels are all inland ports for sea-going ships, though Bruges never recovered its great maritime trade after the silting up of the river Zwijn in the sixteenth century. Grass grows in the streets of Damme, its old harbour three miles to the north, which was big enough in 1214 to hold the entire French fleet, in which Philippe Auguste brought his great army for the conquest of the Low Countries.

Where cows now graze near the little inland town of Sluys a great naval victory was won by the English in 1340 at the start of the Hundred Years' War. Edward III, hearing that another great French fleet had anchored in the Zwijn, attacked them at dawn with three hundred ships. The English archers shot the Frenchmen from their masts and decks 'like leaves before a storm'; and the Flemings from miles around swarmed to join in the slaughter. It was only a few miles from the spot where, nearly six

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centuries later, British seamen and soldiers, shouting 'St George for England' as the archers had shouted at Sluys, surprised a different enemy, when they stormed the Mole at Zeebrugge.¹

AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT. After centuries of hard work, in which the ancient forests were cleared and the land was dried and drained, irrigated and scientifically manured (processes which, as will be seen below, were constantly arrested by wars), Flanders became one of the richest agricultural areas of Europe. It grew good corn, sugar-beet and vegetable crops. But with the increase of the population in the middle of the last century and the prevalence of Free Trade, Belgium came to depend more and more upon imported grain, and in 1930 three-quarters of the necessary cereals came from overseas. Consequently, corn-growing in Flanders, as in the undulating country south and west of Brussels, rapidly declined, so that now it takes up less than a third of the arable land. The cultivation of beet, potatoes and vegetables developed and even more the breeding of cows, goats, pigs and poultry. These give the modern Flemish farm and small holding their typical character to-day.

But all through these developments one crop remained in favour—flax for the linen industry. The waters of the river Lys were found to be particularly good for retting the flax. Anywhere between the French frontier and Ghent may be seen the strong wooden crates in which the flax is soaked, held just under the surface of the river by heavy stones. By this process, which takes about a fort-

¹ See Omond, *Belgium and Luxembourg*. (Hodder and Stoughton.)

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night, fermentation takes place and the fibres of the stalk are split up, in preparation for drying and spinning. In a hot summer the pungent smell of the retted flax hangs over the countryside, between the riverside towns and villages. In the Middle Ages and indeed until the development of mechanical weaving, linen was woven not only in Ghent, Courtrai, Ypres and Bruges, but in almost every farmstead. The farmers were weavers themselves and their wives and daughters worked the spinning-wheels. Nowadays, there are small weaving factories with a few hundred looms in many little towns and big villages. They form a close association between local industry and agriculture, as do the breweries (of which there are no less than 1,223) and many other small factories using industrial crops. In these parts, therefore, there is no clear contrast between the political and economic interests and outlook of the townsfolk and those of the countrymen, such as is encountered in many countries.

THE CLOTH INDUSTRY. The other great industry, which made the wealth of Flanders in the Middle Ages, but has now almost entirely disappeared, was the making of cloth. It was to the prosperity of the guilds of cloth-weavers and merchants that are due the splendid cloth halls and town halls of Ypres, Bruges and Ghent, the immense churches which tower over the plain, the richly decorated town houses, the almshouses, and the treasures of art which these buildings contain. Great quantities of wool were imported for centuries from Southern England for the Flemish weavers. The effects of wars and, ultimately, the competition of the machine-made cloth from the north of England,

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after the Industrial Revolution, destroyed the cloth trade of the Flemish towns as they did that of their smaller English rivals, Reading and Newbury. The mechanized cotton industry, centred in Ghent, depending entirely upon imports, has nowadays taken its place.

The exploitation of the coal, discovered in Hainaut, in the province of Liège and later in the Campine, was the foundation of the heavy industries of modern Belgium.

THE CROSSROADS OF WESTERN EUROPE. While the economic development of Belgium, its agriculture, trade and industries, have been conditioned by the nature of the land and the waterways, it has been even more determined by the geographical position of the country. Belgium, and especially the Flemish plain, lie at a crossing of the ways. Here is the junction between Western Europe and the great plain of Northern Europe, which stretches, with no formidable natural barrier, from the North Sea coast into the Slav lands. Across it pass the old trade routes between the north and the south of the Continent, and again from the British Isles, and in later centuries the Americas, to Central Europe. Seyss-Inquart, Hitler's High Commissioner for the Netherlands, declared to the Dutch, soon after the Luftwaffe had laid Rotterdam in ruins:

'The control of the Scheldt and Rhine estuaries must be wrested from England; and, as Holland holds this vital ocean-gateway to the Continent she must be won over to the New Order. There can be no question of independence.'

That is only the last stage of a long series of

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rivalries which have led one great military and economic power after another to covet the ocean-gateway and the rich trading centres which grew up in its neighbourhood, as well in the Southern as in the Northern Netherlands.

This made the Low Countries and especially Belgium an almost perpetual battle-ground. For centuries it was a kind of no-man's-land between Germany and France, and later a 'Barrier' between France and Holland, when the latter had become a great, independent maritime power.

When the Carolingian Empire was partitioned in 843 among the grandsons of Charles the Great—the beginning of the great division between the West Franks (France) and the East Franks (Germany)—all the land between the Scheldt and the Rhine formed part of the domain of the Emperor Lothaire I. This domain did not keep its political unity for long; and for the greater part of five centuries it was split into a bewildering number of small states under feudal overlords, perpetually fighting one another and almost always defying the emperor, to whom they owed homage. Flanders on the other hand, though it had its share of wars, enjoyed sufficient periods of peace under its counts to enable the first great urban civilization of mediaeval Europe to develop there.

THE BURGUNDIAN PERIOD. The first power to unite the Netherlands politically—though the towns never gave up the struggle for their sovereign rights—was Burgundy. Philip the Hardy, Duke of Burgundy, secured Flanders by marriage in 1384; and from then until 1555 the whole of the Netherlands, in-

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cluding even the Prince-Bishopric of Liège,¹ despite constant attacks by France, came under Burgundian rule. Burgundy might have remained a great buffer state between France and Germany and so altered the whole course of European history; but the ambitious plans of that ruthless warrior, Charles the Bold of Burgundy, were his undoing. After he was killed at the battle of Nancy, his daughter Mary married the Archduke Maximilian, soon to become emperor.

THE SPANISH DOMINATION. From this union resulted the absorption of the Netherlands, a generation later, into the vast Empire which included Central Europe, Northern Italy, Spain and the New World. There followed fifty years of revolt against Spanish rule, complicated by the religious war between Catholicism and Calvinism, a time of much violence and bitterness. During the seventeenth century, when the Belgian cities and provinces had reasserted their virtual independence under the overlordship of Spain, and most of the Spanish troops had been withdrawn, the division between the Northern and Southern Netherlands, which has lasted ever since, became effective. The Northern or United Provinces had successfully defended their freedom against the Spaniards and remained mainly Protestant, under the House of Orange. The Southern Provinces, roughly the modern Belgium, saw a great renaissance of Catholicism, in religious practice, literature and the arts, which had equally enduring results. It was the age of Rubens.

¹ Charles the Bold finally subdued Liège in 1468 by massacring almost the whole population.