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I

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 Edited by John Eppstein  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

## CONTENTS

*Editorial Note* *page vii*

INTRODUCTION ix

The Two Wars

CHAPTER I. THE PLACE OF BELGIUM IN  
 EUROPE I

Flanders and Wallonia—War with the Sea—Agricultural  
 Development—The Cloth Industry—The Crossroads of  
 Western Europe—The Burgundian Period—The Spanish  
 Domination—Austrian Rule: the Beginning of Belgium—  
 Some Economic and Cultural Consequences—The Im-  
 print of France—Growth of the Belgian Kingdom—  
 Ideas and Institutions—A Market-Place or a Battle-field

CHAPTER II. POLITICAL HISTORY OF BELGIUM,  
 1830–1940 20

The Belgian Revolution—Leopold I—Leopold II—  
 Ascendancy of the Middle Class—Differences over  
 Defence—The Congo—Conscription—The Political Par-  
 ties—Rise of the Socialist Party—The Flemish Question  
 —Albert I—Acceptance of the German Challenge—  
 Aftermath of the War (1914–18)—The Years of Crisis—  
 Leopold III—The Rexistes—Collapse of International  
 Security—The Policy of Independence—The Second  
 German Invasion

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-42607-8 - British Survey Handbooks: Belgium

Edited by John Eppstein

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

vi

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER III. THE LIFE OF THE PEOPLE *page* 46

Patriotism despite Centrifugal Influences—The Family—Good Housekeeping—Religion and Politics—The Education Question—A possible Reorientation—Life of the Church—Church and State—Processions: Kermesses; Carnivals—The Curé and the Nazis—The Two Belgiams—Local Government—The Bourgmestre—Decentralized Authority—Medical Services—A Wealth of Societies—Popular Pastimes—Trade Unions and Cooperatives

## CHAPTER IV. EFFECTS OF THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. I. GOVERNMENT AND PEOPLE 67

The Patient Centre—Changes in the People's Attitude—Position of the Belgian Government—Importance of the Congo—Position of the King—Administration under the Germans—Retribution for Collaborators—Reaction of the Military Administration—Finance

## CHAPTER V. EFFECTS OF THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. II. HARDSHIPS AND RESISTANCE 82

Economic Conditions—Labour—Conscription and Deportation—Resistance of Organized Labour—Resistance of the Church—The Underground Press—Sabotage—Courage of the Little Man

## NOTE ON THE GRAND DUCHY OF LUXEMBOURG 98

*Index* 105*Map of Belgium*

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978-1-107-42607-8 - British Survey Handbooks: Belgium  
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[More information](#)

---

## EDITORIAL NOTE

This is one of a series of small books, which can be carried in the pocket, about European countries; they are published by the Cambridge University Press in association with the British Society for International Understanding.

The object of the series is to give the essential background of each country; some knowledge of the characteristics and customs of its people, and reliable information about the effects of the war upon them. It is hoped that the handbooks will be of practical value to students of foreign affairs, who are not specialists, and in particular to those whose duties may carry them into those countries, whether in a military capacity or as agents of relief.

Every attempt has been made to bring the available information up to date and, in particular, to show the conditions which have prevailed as a result of enemy occupation.

I am particularly indebted to Monsieur Jean Leroy, of the Belgian Commission for the Study of Post-War Problems, for his kindness in contributing the substance of Chapter II and for checking the typescript of the book. A few extracts of British Survey, Volume IV, Nos. 19 and 21, have been brought up to date and incorporated in the text.

JOHN EPPSTEIN

*May 1944*

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---



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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

## INTRODUCTION

**THE TWO WARS.** The Belgians have the unhappy privilege, which they share with the Poles and the people of Northern France, of being experts in enduring, and reacting against, the military rule of the Germans. They have seen their country invaded and occupied twice within a quarter of a century by the same enemy. The experience of the first German occupation of 1914–18 must always be remembered when judging the attitude of the population to the second and worse infliction.

It is vividly present to the minds of all middle-aged Belgians, for instance, that the first German tyranny was in fact broken by the victory of the Western Allies and especially the intervention of the United States.

The German conquest of Belgium in 1914 was at first an almost incredible nightmare, after generations of European peace. It was so overwhelming that, even despite the continued resistance of the king and the army and of their French and British Allies, it seemed to many that there might be a long period of German rule, comparable to the epochs of Burgundian, Spanish, Austrian and French predominance which had preceded the short-lived independence of the Belgian Kingdom. But after three years they saw the turn of the tide.

When the second German conquest of Belgium occurred in May 1940 it was more ruthless and destructive owing to the new weapons of armoured and air warfare. Yet there was a terrible familiarity

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Edited by John Eppstein  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

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about it. The Belgian Government, evidently anticipating the kind of military occupation which from 1914–18 had, broadly speaking, respected the civil administration of the country, were careful, when they abandoned the capital, to leave the Government Departments intact. The *Secrétaires Généraux*, or Permanent Under-Secretaries, were empowered to administer the existing laws and the municipal authorities were encouraged to remain at their posts. Such dispositions led to the return of certain habits of mind which had been formed by the older generation ‘last time’: a Stoic disposition to make the best of a bad job and to accept the accomplished fact. But so soon as the full implications of the new German rule became apparent there recurred, even during the darkest days of 1940, that other memory of 1918 which made hope revive. It was the memory of an invincible Britain and of the decisive contribution to victory of the United States of America, once the conscience of the American people had been stirred to action. In the present war, as in the last, it was America’s acceptance of the German challenge which solidified Belgian hope and Belgian resistance.

Thus the habits formed, the precedents created during the first period of bondage are not without influence during the second. Then, as now, the Germans, in order to injure the unity of Belgium, sought to exploit to the uttermost the differences between the Flemish and the French-speaking citizens; then, as now, unprincipled and fanatical minorities profited by their country’s misfortune, making money out of the Germans or accepting political advancement at their hands; and the resent-

## INTRODUCTION

xi

ment of the majority at their behaviour poisoned the political life of the country for twenty years.

Then, as now, the most respectable of citizens, not excluding the heads of boarding schools, priests, doctors, and nuns in hospitals, as well as parents, were driven to resort to the most ingenious forms of deception and 'scrounging' in order to preserve or obtain for their charges the bare necessities of life. It will be surprising if the relief organizations which get to work in Belgium after this war do not find the habit of such practices a little disconcerting, as did their predecessors after the last war. Now, as during the occupation of 1914-18, the majority of the people maintain an attitude of stolid mental resistance, struggling to keep their families alive and, in consequence, working unwillingly to the economic advantage of their oppressors; but they do not lack leaders to sustain their faith that freedom will come again, as did the late Cardinal Mercier and Burgomaster Max so valiantly for four long years.

But there are important differences between these two periods of servitude. In the first, the Germans did not pretend to more than a temporary military occupation according to the laws of war. Important neutral diplomats were on the spot in Brussels—Brand Whitlock, the American Minister (for nearly three years), the Nuncio, the Dutch and Swiss Ministers, and the lame Marquis de Villalba, the Spanish Minister. The marquis' old, red-wheeled motor-car was often to be seen standing before the door of Von der Goltz, the Military Governor, or Von Bissing who succeeded him, as he interceded persistently within for the rights of the civil popula-

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Edited by John Eppstein

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

tion. These rights were embodied in the Hague Convention, which the Germans, despite their initial atrocities and intermittent severities, never officially repudiated. In Germany itself there were important parliamentary groups, the Socialist Party and a section of the Centre Party, who argued for the restoration of Belgian independence. The people did not starve. Supplies of food were brought in, with the consent of the belligerents, by the *Comité Hispano-Américain de Ravitaillement*, mainly organized by Mr Hoover, which became the *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais* after America's entry into the war. They were distributed through Regional Dépôts and Local Committees, on which the Germans generally allowed the leaders of the commune, such as the curé, the burgomaster and the schoolmaster to serve. The American Red Cross in Belgium preserved and developed this important framework of relief in the devastated areas for nearly two years after the Armistice.

In this war, however, though the Belgian Red Cross, aided by the International Red Cross, has been able to do a little to meet the most urgent medical needs, no neutral agency has been able to feed the people. The Allies have not allowed any food ships through the blockade. The Germans have ruined the economy of the country and have been either unwilling or unable to supply the loss of the essential imports of grain and fodder. It is inevitable that four or more years of semi-starvation will leave its mark upon the population and especially the growing generation for many years to come. In this case the memory of the conditions of the last war is bound to create a certain bitterness, not directed

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Edited by John Eppstein

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

xiii

solely against the Germans. Again, there will be no war-time framework of relief extending throughout the country which the Allies, upon liberating it, could adapt to meet the economic emergency.

After the last war the physical condition and the state of mind of the people differed greatly according to whether their homes had been in the *Operationsgebiet* (battle area), the *Etapengebiet* (lines of communication), or the *Gouvernement Général*, that is, the rest of the country, which included Brussels, Antwerp, Liège and almost all the French-speaking districts. The front was practically stable. All civilians were evacuated from the *Operationsgebiet*, a band of territory from 10 to 15 kilometres wide behind the front line. In the *Etapengebiet*, a strip of 20 to 30 kilometres along the coast and behind the battle area, including towns like Roulers<sup>1</sup> and Courtrai, most civilians were allowed to remain; and they had a thin time. All but a fraction of their farm produce was requisitioned by the German Army. They might not move from their commune to another without a permit from the *Kommandantur*, the Area Commandant's office; and hostages were frequently seized, taken up the line or threatened with death, if there were any sign of resistance to German orders. In the General Government life was comparatively normal, though food was short and there was much oppression of the mind, owing to the fear of spying and denunciation and the stifling of the free expression of opinion.

There are no such geographical grades of op-

<sup>1</sup> A medical examination of the school children of this town in the winter of 1919-20 showed that 71% were predisposed to tuberculosis.

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pression or liberty under the present Nazi occupation. The Belgian Congo remains under the control of the Belgian Government established in London. But no part of the metropolitan territory is denied to the enemy, as was that corner of Western Flanders, including Furnes, Ypres and Poperinghe, so well known to the old B.E.F., which King Albert and the Belgian Army saved by the inundations of the Yser and held with their British and French Allies throughout the last war—a symbol of national defiance. The whole territory and population of Belgium suffer now from a uniform and more thorough system of oppression. Out of 8,250,000 inhabitants, only some 16,000 escaped to England, mainly from Ostend and Dunkirk, and a few through Marseilles or Spain, after the short campaign in which armed resistance was crushed by the invader between 10 and 28 May 1940. The King of the Belgians, having decided to share the fate of his army and people, is a prisoner of war in his Palace of Laeken, outside Brussels. General von Falkenhäusen, the Military Governor, rules the country, using or abusing the services of the unhappy civil servants left by their Ministers in charge of Government Departments in Brussels. There are no powerful neutrals to restrain the claims and depredations of the occupying power. And the occupation is now far more political and economic, than purely military. Nazi doctrines of permanent domination form the only theme of public expression officially permitted either in the press or on the wireless. The very 'idea of Belgium', as it is called, is ridiculed and decried as a thing of the past.