

Chapter 4

Reluctant Ally (1909–1934)

The Making of a Belgicist

Albert I, the third King of the Belgians, was born on 8 April 1875. His father, Philippe, the Count of Flanders, was Leopold II's younger brother. Philippe was a gloomy man. His moods were worst when his wife, Marie of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, was around. Fortunately, she liked to travel and spent much of the year abroad.

Philippe lived in his Brussels palace in the Rue de la Régence on Koudenberg Hill. He devoted his time to collecting antiques and rare books. His library eventually contained over 30,000 volumes. Part of the collection was of a pornographic nature. Of all the grandchildren of Duke Francis of Coburg-Saalfeld, Philippe most resembled his paternal grandfather in his lack of political ambition. He was not interested in founding dynasties and building empires. The fact that he had started to grow gradually deaf in his twenties, helps to explain his attitude. 'The Count of Flanders is very nimble, clever and prudent — but unfortunately stonedeaf,' Queen Victoria said about her cousin.

In 1866, the Romanians elected Philippe as their king without asking him. He responded by sending a simple telegram to Bucharest. In one sentence he refused the offer. The crown of Romania subsequently went to Prince Karl of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen. The following year the Count of Flanders married a girl Queen Victoria had picked for him. It was the myopic Marie of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, a younger sister of the new King of Romania.

Between 1869 and 1875, the Count and Countess of Flanders had five children. A boy, Baudouin, was born in 1869. Two twin daughters, Henriette and Joséphine, were born in 1870. Baby Joséphine died barely two months old. Another daughter, also called Joséphine, was born in 1872. Finally, in 1875, a second son was born. He was called Albert, after his Saxe-Coburg cousin, Queen Victoria's late husband.

Marie and her children only spent the winter months at Brussels. Each spring, they travelled for a holiday to her mother's residence at Umkirch near Freiburg in south-western Germany. The Count, whom his children mysteriously called '*die Pääppin'*' (a plural in the feminine gender), seldom accompanied them. He made his own trips to Italy, where he went to purchase art, and to Paris for pleasure. In the summer, they spent their time in one of the South-German or Swiss castles of the Sigmaringens (later the Count of Flanders bought his own Swiss residence, the Villa Haslihorn on the shores of Lake Lucerne), or at the castle of Les Amerois, near Bouillon in Belgian Luxembourg. Each autumn, a second or third visit was made to Germany, before returning to hibernate in Brussels.

When in Brussels, the Flanders family was expected to have dinner with the royal family at Laken every Tuesday and Thursday. The children hated this. They invented strange nicknames for the sovereigns: the King was '*der bäcktelein'*' and the Queen '*die bäckin'*' (without capital letters). They noticed that the *bäcktelein* was not interested in children, not even his own, while the *bäckin* was often '*bissig'*' (short-tempered) towards them and was only kind to her dogs.

In 1876, Leopold II appointed Jules Bosmans, a 30-year-old Flemish polyglot who had studied at the universities of Leuven, Bonn and the prestigious Sorbonne in Paris, as tutor to Prince Baudouin, who was the heir to the Belgian throne. Bosmans also taught Latin, Economics, Law and Dutch to Albert. Every week, Albert had four hours of tuition in the Dutch language; Bosmans complained to Prince Philippe that he was bad at it. According to his teachers, Albert was undisciplined. The teachers also complained that the boy was insincere. Albert often felt insecure, which he tried to hide behind fits of rage.

The Countess Marie, a pious Catholic, did not like the influence of the non-religious Bosmans on her sons, but as Bosmans was the King's choice, she had to accept him. In 1888, the Count of Flanders appointed a governor for Albert, a young officer, Harry Jungbluth, the son of a German father and an English mother. The Countess disapproved of Jungbluth as well. He was a Protestant and an avowed bachelor who did not engage in stable relationships with women.

One of the King's collaborators, Baron Greindl, warned that Albert's tutors were giving him 'dangerous books' — works by socialist authors such as Marx and Bebel, and free-thinking philosophers, like Herbert Spencer. Leopold II, however, was not much interested in Albert. The boy was of no importance to him. Albert was impressed by the books, which convinced him of the inevitable rise of socialism as a political force. When the socialist deputies made republican speeches in Parliament, Albert was greatly disturbed. In March 1895, he wrote in his diary: 'The socialist movement is anti-dynasty. Something must urgently be done about this. Unfortunately, the *bäcktelein* and the *Päppin* are not very popular; they do not do enough and do not show themselves enough.' In a letter to her daughter Henriette, the Countess of Flanders regretted that Albert looked at the world 'through the obscure eyes of a socialist.'

During his formative years, Albert also reached another conclusion that he would adhere to throughout his life: the 20th-century was going to be the age of the Anglo-Saxons. He came to this *belief* — for it was, indeed, a religious conviction — during his years as a student at the Belgian Royal Military Academy at Terkameren, near Brussels. The most remarkable professors at the Academy in the early 1890s were two Protestant brothers, Charles and Eugène Lagrange. They were mathematicians who had developed a historical and political theory, based on what they called *Brück's Law*. Major Nicholas-Rémy Brück was a Belgian military engineer, who had 'discovered' that a literal reading of the Bible combined with mathematical calculations contained the key to predict future political developments. The Lagrange brothers 'improved' Brück's theory by adding the measurements of the pyramid of Cheops. Hence, they had 'calculated' that the world would come to an end exactly 5,160 years after the creation of Adam. The complete history of the world could be divided into ten periods of 516 years, each of which were dominated by a leading people. The tenth and last in this series of dominating peoples were the British and the Americans. They were the descendants of the lost tribes of Israel.

The Lagranges' teaching had an enormous influence on their pupils. One of them, Emile Galet, later became the head of the Belgian General Staff. Galet's successor as head of the General Staff, Prudent Nuyten, was also an adept of Brück's Law, as was General Raoul Van Overstraeten, military advisor to King Leopold III in the 1930s and 40s. In 1924, Albert asked the British King George V to help produce a movie about the origin of the Stone of Scone and the identification of the British people with the lost tribes of Israel.

Another newly constructed semi-scientific theory that made a lasting impression on the prince was *Belgicism*. This ideology was devised in the 1890s by two Walloon intellectuals, Edmond Picard and Henri Pirenne. Picard, a socialist member of the Belgian Senate, was an outspoken anti-Semite, who held that the superior Aryan race was locked in a class struggle with the 'capitalist' Jews. His anti-Jewish sentiments were shared by other prominent Walloon socialists, including Jules Destrée and Louis Bertrand, the editor of the newspaper *Le Peuple*. Picard was a prolific writer and polemicist. In 1893, he wrote the essay *La révision des origines du christianisme* about the allegedly non-Jewish roots of Christianity. In 1895, he published *Comment on devient socialiste* (How to Become a Socialist). In 1897, his most influential essay, *L'âme belge* (The Belgian Soul), was published. In this work, Picard argued that while the two peoples living in Belgium may differ in language, they still belong to the same Belgian 'race.' In fact, according to Picard, no Flemings or Walloons existed, but only Belgians.

To the governing Belgian elite, Picard's theory came as a godsend. Even the non-socialists embraced it wholeheartedly. It offered comfortable moral reassurance. Thus far, the ruling classes had never denied the artificiality of the Belgian state. Thanks to Picard, they no longer needed to feel like parasites living off a state they were bound to defend because it was their livelihood. Now they could pretend to be defenders of the unity of 'a real nation' and hence argue that their defence of this nation was inspired by the altruistic, generous virtue of patriotism. Thanks to Picard, the base, materialistic personal interests of those running the Belgian state could be wrapped in a moral principle.

Albert was one of those who eagerly accepted Picard's notion of the 'Belgian Soul.' To the *bäcktelein* and the *Päppin*, the Flamingants fighting for the rights of the Flemish people against the artificial state of Belgium were dangerous political opponents capable of destroying the Saxe-Coburg family business. To Albert, the Flamingants were utterly immoral as well. There existed no Flemish people, only a Belgian people to which the Flamingants were traitors.

One year after the publication of *L'âme belge*, Picard embarked on another anti-Semitic crusade, writing *L'Aryano-Sémitisme*. He left it to others to expand his theory of Belgicism. Picard may have invented the concept of the 'Belgian Soul,' but its foundations were laid by Henri Pirenne. The latter was a Walloon historian from Liège who had been given a job at the University of Ghent, where he became one of Europe's leading specialists in the economic and social history of

the Middle Ages. In 1899, Pirenne, inspired by Picard's revelation of the 'Belgian Soul,' set out on an enormous project: to rewrite the entire history of the Southern Netherlands from a Belgicist perspective. Pirenne's *Histoire de Belgique* appeared in seven volumes, published between 1900 and 1932. According to Pirenne, Belgium was one of the oldest nations in the whole of Europe, instead of a 19th-century invention. To Pirenne, Charlemagne, 'the father of Europe,' had been a Belgian. Charlemagne's Frankish Empire, where people of Latin and Germanic origin lived together, had been a precursor of Belgium. The independence of Belgium in 1830 was an inevitability, said Pirenne, because the Belgian nation – the very core of the state of Charlemagne – still existed, and was bound to reappear like a phoenix.

Pirenne rejected the Flamingants' argument that the Flemings and the Walloons were different peoples because they had never spoken the same tongue. In his *Histoire de Belgique*, he asserts that Flanders had *always* been bilingual. He 'proved' this by referring to medieval documents of the Flemish nobility written in French. (Using the same argument, one can also 'prove' that the English are the same people as the French.) From this assertion, Pirenne drew political conclusions. He argued that, as Flanders had 'always been bilingual,' the Francophones were entitled to the same linguistic rights as the Dutch-speakers in Flanders. Pirenne – like Picard – did not deny the Flemings the right to use Dutch in their own country, which was more than the Belgian regime allowed them in the 19th century, but Dutch was clearly inferior to French.

When in the 1930s, the Flamingants succeeded in having Flanders (excluding Brussels) recognised as a Dutch-speaking region where French ceased to be an official language, Pirenne and other Belgicists were furious: Flanders had been 'stolen' from them, they said. The Flamingants were not only traitors, they were thieves as well, robbing Belgium of its soul by denying the Francophones the right to speak French in Flanders. The Belgicists had effectively turned the argument around. They portrayed the Flamingants, who were fighting against the linguistic discrimination of the Flemish people, as intolerant ideologues because they denied others the right to impose French as an official language in Flanders.

Because of Picard and Pirenne, the Flamingants lost the moral high ground to the Belgicists. The Flamingants had another major disadvantage as well: they lacked foreign allies. Their Belgicist adversaries, through their writings in French, had direct access to international public opinion. The Flamingant's books, written in Dutch, were not read abroad. Even in England, the traditional geopolitical ally of the

Flemings, Flanders disappeared from the picture. Flemish cities such as Mechelen, traditionally known in England as *Mechlin*, came to be referred to by the French name, *Malines*. The Dutch-speaking Flemings no longer existed as a people. They were Belgians now, who spoke French if they were educated, and otherwise some kind of Low-German dialect, called 'Flemish'.

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With the exception of Albert's mother and Baron Greindl, few people were disturbed by the fact that the prince was acquainting himself with socialist theories and weird ideas such as Brück's Law. The focus of all public attention was Albert's elder brother, Baudouin. By January 1891, the 21-year-old Baudouin was a dashing Colonel and a reputed lady-killer. He was also the pawn in a power game between King Leopold and the Count of Flanders. The relationship between the *bäcktelein* and the *Päppin* had become strained, as the latter kept vetoing a marriage between Baudouin and the King's daughter Clementine. Officially Philippe objected to a marriage between first cousins, because he feared this would lead to genetic degeneration. He said he suspected his own deafness to have been caused by the (distant) relationship between his parents. He also referred to the haemophilia that had afflicted Queen Victoria's offspring.

In reality, Philippe used the genetic argument as an alibi to thwart his brother's marriage scheme. He did not want Leopold to become the grandfather to a future Belgian King. That was his way of taking revenge on his elder brother. This became perfectly clear when three years later, in 1894, he gave his daughter Joséphine, who had inherited her father's hearing impediment, permission to marry her first cousin, Prince Carlo of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen.

While Leopold II and Philippe quarrelled about marrying Baudouin to Clementine, tragedy struck. Baudouin died unexpectedly on 23 January 1891 of pneumonia. The death of his brother dramatically changed Albert's hitherto quiet life. Suddenly 'the red prince' was the heir to the Belgian throne. At once, the *bäcktelein* started interfering with his nephew's education. The King's collaborators, people such as the Barons Lambermont and Dhansis, came to instruct the young man about Belgian politics and Congo matters.

It became part of Albert's duty as Crown Prince to represent the King at various official occasions. In 1896, Albert travelled to Russia to attend the coronation of Tsar Nicholas II. The journey took him through Warsaw, which, in a letter to Jules Bosmans, he described as

‘extremely filthy and packed with miserly Jews.’¹ The Prince’s duties also included opening festivities in Belgium. When Albert had to make speeches in Flanders, he did his best to deliver at least a couple of sentences in Dutch, which he carefully read from a piece of paper. They were written according to Albert’s wishes by Jules Bosmans and invariably stressed the importance of Belgian unity and the need for all Belgians to cooperate – moral imperatives which, according to Albert, the Flamings were undermining. ‘When speaking to the Flemings, one must never forget to talk in this fashion,’ Albert instructed Bosmans.²

Meanwhile, the Prince had met two men who would remain close collaborators for the rest of his life. Emile Sigogne was a Professor of Elocution at the University of Liège. Jungbluth had advised Albert to take some lessons from Sigogne in order to improve his French. Sigogne, a French-born immigrant, was a prominent member of the Masonic lodge and an influential advisor of the socialist Belgian Workers’ Party (BWP). He encouraged Albert to study Marx more thoroughly and helped him in his efforts to reconcile the BWP to the Saxe-Coburg dynasty. To this end, in 1905, Sigogne authored a political essay, *Socialisme et monarchie – Essai de synthèse sociale*, which he dedicated to the Prince. It argued that a monarchic regime was not incompatible with social progress.

Jungbluth also introduced the Prince to Emile Waxweiler, a young engineer who had just returned from the United States. In 1898, inspired by Waxweiler’s enthusiastic stories of America and his own belief in the ascendancy of Anglo-Saxon world domination, Albert asked permission from both the *bäcktelein* and the *Päppin* to travel to the United States. His father replied that he did ‘not understand what could possibly attract him in America.’ But the King granted his permission and used the opportunity to charge Harry Jungbluth to contact American business companies and recommend ‘the good quality of Congo rubber.’

The Prince and his party arrived in New York in March 1898. They travelled to San Francisco and back, before returning home in July. Albert was greatly impressed, but at the same time came to loath the Americans – these ‘parvenus’ as he called them. In a letter to Bosmans, he wrote: ‘This nation has until now limited its activities to commercial and industrial undertakings. It will, however, turn militarist and become a danger to the world. Within the next twenty years

1 RAM WC, Albert to Bosmans from Moscow, 28 May 1896.

2 RAM WC, Albert to Bosmans, 19 Aug. 1897.

it will have the biggest fleet in the world, which it will abuse to interfere in situations that are none of its business. That is going to be the biggest danger of the coming century.³ According to Brück's Law, the Anglo-Saxon ascendancy in world politics was an inevitability, but this did not mean that Albert liked the prospect.

While the Prince was in the U.S., a war erupted between America and Spain. Albert wrote to his father that he hoped the Americans would lose the war, 'in order to calm their jingoism.' If the Americans win, he warned, 'they will become incurable and their arrogance will grow unbearable.' A couple of years later, during the Anglo-Boer War, Albert was equally partisan in his anti-British feelings. 'The English have been beaten,' he rejoiced, 'that will teach them a lesson.'

In 1898, Albert, by now 23 years old, asked his uncle's permission to marry Princess Isabelle of Orléans. King Leopold refused, arguing that he did not want to offend the French Republic. He made a counterproposal, offering Albert his granddaughter, the Austrian Archduchess Elisabeth (or *Erszi* as the family called her), in marriage. If Albert accepted, the King would give him the Congo Free State as a wedding present. Albert was not interested in marrying the Archduchess who, being eight years his junior, was but a child. By 1900, however, he considered life at his parent's home to have become utterly unbearable. He wanted to move out as soon as possible, and even marry *Erszi* if need be. 'Papa nowadays has periods of very bad depressions, black melancholy and vicious rage,' he wrote to his sister Joséphine. 'The Pöppin have also introduced the rules of a convent here, but at the same time he remains hopelessly inactive, always repeating the same things. What I most lack here is life.'⁴ When, however, Count John d'Oultremont wrote to the King on Albert's behalf that the Prince was willing to marry the Archduchess, Leopold replied that such a marriage was out of the question. His daughter Stephanie had recently married the 'sheep-herding' Count Lonyay without his approval. As a consequence, he did not consider her to be his daughter anymore and, hence, did not want anything to do with Stephanie's daughter either.

Whilst turning down Albert's request, King Leopold proposed that his nephew marry a Russian Grand-Duchess, but Albert had Oultremont inform the King that 'the Grand-Duchess is ugly.' Two weeks after the King's veto of *Erszi*, Albert, afraid that the *bäcktelein* would propose yet another ugly princess, presented his uncle with a

3 RAM WC, Albert to Jules Bosmans from San Francisco, 25 Apr. 1898.

4 Quoted in Albert I 2, p. 30.

choice made by his sister Henriette: Elisabeth Wittelsbach, a 24-year-old cousin of Henriette's husband, the Duke of Vendôme. Albert travelled to the Vendôme residence at Neuilly near Paris, where he met Elisabeth for the first time during a family dinner arranged by Henriette. He preferred Elisabeth's younger, and prettier, sister, Marie-Gabrielle, and was disappointed to learn that the latter had already been promised to Crown Prince Rupert of Bavaria. Hence, he had to make do with Elisabeth. 'I think she is excellent,' he wrote to Henriette after his return to Brussels; 'I was more impressed with her than I have shown.'

Henriette replied that she would invite Elisabeth and her parents over to Paris again as soon as possible. Albert could then ask her father for her hand. The Count of Flanders objected that the Wittelsbach family was not rich enough to his opinion. 'They do not have a penny,' he remarked, but King Leopold made no objections. Consequently, the meeting of Albert and the Wittelsbachs at Neuilly was arranged for 29 May. *Liesel*, as Elisabeth was called at home, was one of three daughters of Prince Karl Theodor, the Duke in Bavaria. The Dukes belonged to a collateral branch of the royal House of Bavaria. Both Wittelsbach branches, the Kings of Bavaria, as well as the Dukes in Bavaria, were known for their eccentricity, due – it was said – to excessive inbreeding.

Things went very fast. The engagement was officially announced on 30 May. The next day Albert returned to Brussels. The betrothed promised to write each other every day. In his letters, the Belgian prince was very prosaic. Marriage 'is always a lottery,' he wrote, advising Elisabeth to enjoy her freedom while she could: 'Afterwards we will not be able to change our minds.' She, however, as befitted a Wittelsbach, was very passionate. 'If only I could be inside this letter and embrace you when you open it and cover you with kisses,' she wrote, 'I am so impatient to see you again, I shall cuddle you to bits.' And in another letter: 'I should so love to come to you and embrace you and tug at your hair, I love you so much that I would jump into water and fire for you.'⁵

The next summer, Albert travelled to Bavaria with his father. The *Päppin*, who preferred tall, big women, was not impressed with his future daughter-in-law, who in his opinion lacked a pair of firm breasts and a round bottom. 'The young Elisabeth is not very pretty, she is rather small and does not have much shape,' he wrote to his daughter Joséphine. 'We are used to beautiful tall princesses, like

5 Quoted in Marie-José, pp. 25–7.

your mother was and still is, as well as you two, my good daughters. I think the public will be disappointed with the small Elisabeth.’⁶

Albert and Elisabeth were married in Munich on 2 October 1900, in the presence of Albert’s two royal uncles, the Kings of Belgium and Romania, and Elisabeth’s cousin, the Prince-Regent of Bavaria. According to Article 60 of the Belgian Constitution, the Belgian government had to approve the marriage of the Crown Prince. Failure to do so would *automatically* mean that the Prince would lose his rights of succession. The ministers, however, were never asked for their approval. It is possible that the vindictive Leopold II deliberately ‘forgot’ to do so. No one seemed to bother about it — at least not for the time being.

The groom was a tall, pessimistic, self-doubting man. He was myopic, like his mother, and had to wear glasses, but he was handsome like his maternal Sigmaringen relatives (no Bourbon nose here) and had a little beard. Later Albert would shave the beard, keeping only a moustache. The bride was a small, vivacious woman, with short hair and a sharp, long and bony face. She had a strong personality and was uninhibited. *Liesel* was one of the first German nudists, convinced of the benevolent influence of the sun on one’s naked body. Her nudist practice tanned her skin, so she powdered it to look paler as fashion required. Like her father, she was a gifted musician and had very liberal ideas about morality and religion. Nominally Elisabeth was a Catholic, but she was very unorthodox; she believed in reincarnation and astrology.

Albert and Elisabeth were a good match. Though Elisabeth was a feminist, she allowed Albert to boss her around. She called him ‘*Männele*’ (dear husband), he called her ‘*Liesel*,’ ‘*Sabeth*,’ or ‘*Kind’l*’ (dear child). When he talked about her in the third person, he referred to her as ‘*das Kind*’ (the child). He sent her written instructions, like: ‘*Das Kind* has to take good care of itself. It has to have a good breakfast. It has to eat well around noontime. It has to cover itself well, certainly not wear thin socks, and it has to put on booties that keep its feet warm.’ She said she felt like a ‘*Hund*’ that had to listen to its ‘*Herrle*,’ — a dog that had to listen to its master — but she did not mind. She pretended to listen to ‘*Männele*,’ and continued to do things her own way.

After their marriage, the newlyweds went to live in a huge house, the *Hôtel d’Assche* in Brussels’ quiet and elegant Leopold Quarter. Albert felt obliged to pay daily visits to his father, but he hated it.

6 Quoted in Albert I 2, p. 34.

‘These visits demand much of me,’ he confessed to Henriette. ‘We feel like strangers. *Les bonnes Pöppin* [the good Pöppin: plural, feminine gender] have grown very old. There is only one thing dominating them: the hatred of the *bäcktelein* — and it has really become a genuine hatred.’

The first decade of the 20th-century saw the old generation of the Saxe-Coburgs pass away. Queen Victoria died in 1901; the *bäckin* in 1902; the *Pöppin* on 17 November 1905; the *bäcktelein* in 1909. Only the Countess of Flanders survived the decade: she died in 1912. Meanwhile, a new generation was born. The birth of Albert’s first child, Leopold, on 3 November 1901 was greeted with 101 cannonshots. A second son, Charles, followed in 1903; and in 1906 a daughter was born, christened Marie-José after her maternal grandmother.

Albert prepared himself thoroughly for the day that he would succeed his uncle. He met a young hardworking intellectual of Flemish origin with left-wing sympathies, Jules Ingenbleek, whom he engaged as his personal secretary. Ingenbleek and Albert discussed social problems, visited Britain to study social conditions in the English industrial areas, and closely watched the development of the socialist parties in Belgium and its neighbouring countries. After making the acquaintance of the French social-democrat Alfred Léon Gérault-Richard in February 1906, the Prince concluded that ‘in the future the socialist movement will inevitably be linked to more reformist and less revolutionary attitudes.’⁷ This was a comforting conclusion: it made an alliance of interests possible between the socialists and the monarchy.

The Pontiffs of Socialism

The *bäcktelein* had been one of the most controversial men in Belgium. At Leopold II’s funeral, while the royal coffin was being driven on a carriage through the streets of Brussels, onlookers shouted insults at the corpse, turned their backs to the hearse and spat at it. This caused Albert to panic. That evening, on 22 December 1909, he tried to memorise the constitutional oath that he was to take the next morning in Parliament. He became extremely agitated. ‘I cannot do it,’ he cried, ‘I will not take the oath.’⁸ Elisabeth, unable to calm him down, summoned Ingenbleek to the palace. The latter argued with the Prince till the early hours and was able to talk him round.

7 Albert I 2, p. 42.

8 Albert I 2, p. 348.

The next day, Albert took the oath. Everything worked out well, apart from a minor incident when some socialist MPs yelled: 'Equal voting rights for all.' The leader of the Belgian Workers' Party, Emile Vandervelde, later apologised to Albert: 'We did not criticise you, but the bastards in the government.'⁹ Since 1894, Belgium had had an electoral system with plural votes: every male citizen from the age of 25 had one vote, but supplementary votes were given – to fathers from the age of 35, to intellectuals holding a degree of higher education, and to men who owned their own house – with a maximum of three votes per individual. The Socialists demanded a *one man, one vote* system. After the inauguration ceremony, the new King rode to Laken. He stopped at the *Maison Populaire*, the headquarters of the BWP, to greet the red flag.

Albert was relieved that the inauguration had passed smoothly and that the Socialists accepted him. Only a flaming lawyer from Ghent, Alfons Jonckx, questioned his authority. Jonckx argued that Albert had lost his rights to the crown because the Government had not explicitly approved his marriage to Elisabeth in 1900, as Articles 60 and 64 of the Constitution required. In the Brussels Liberal newspaper *Le Soir* of 6 January, Beernaert, the eminent jurist and former Prime Minister, acknowledged that there had indeed been 'a theoretical violation of the letter of the Constitution.' However, as everyone seemed to be quite happy with the King, it was better to 'smile and forget the whole affair.'

There was also some criticism of Albert's alleged *red* sympathies. 'He is said to adhere to a certain socialism,' *Le Soir* wrote. The paper referred to a secret memorandum from the Papal Nuncio in Brussels to the Vatican, which had been leaked to the press. It stated that the King was 'deplorably half-hearted as a Catholic,' that he read 'dangerous books' and that he had surrounded himself with 'free-thinkers, freemasons, even socialists.'¹⁰

The Belgian bishops, however, supported Albert. The Archbishop of Mechelen and Primate of Belgium, Cardinal Désiré Mercier, was careful not to undermine the foundation which underpinned the Belgian state. None of the Catholic newspapers, all of them under direct control of the Church hierarchy, published even the slightest criticism of the King. On the contrary, they emphatically described him as 'a most Catholic king.' Mercier had become Archbishop in 1906 with the approval of Leopold II. The Cardinal was a Walloon and an outspo-

9 Vandervelde 2, p. 182.

10 *Le Soir*, 18 and 26 Dec. 1909.

ken Belgicist. 'Patriotism is a Christian virtue,' he said, referring to Saint Thomas Aquinas. By patriotism, Mercier meant Belgian nationalism, not Flemish patriotism, which to Mercier was not only treason but a sin. In the seminaries young trainee priests were taught that the Flemish Movement was an invention of the Devil: '*Motus iste flandricus, a diabolo inventus.*'¹¹

Through its entire history, from the early Middle Ages right up to the Belgian Revolution of 1830, Flanders had been one of the most prosperous regions in the whole of Europe. The industrialisation process that Dutch King Willem had started in Ghent, Antwerp and other Flemish cities, was suddenly brought to a halt in September 1830. In the new state, the government's attention was focused almost exclusively on Wallonia, the southern Francophone part of the country. From the beginning, the Francophone revolutionary elite, the creators of the new state, made very clear to the King what part of the country he had to cater for. When in 1834 Leopold I decided to build the first Belgian railway line between Brussels and Antwerp, Alexandre Gendebien, one of the fathers of the Belgian Revolution, objected that the railroad had to be constructed between Brussels and his Walloon home province of Hainaut, whose economic interests, he said, were being 'sacrificed' to those of 'Orangist Antwerp.' In a speech in Parliament on 11 March, Gendebien warned the King. 'Bear this in mind,' he said, 'If you refuse to listen to the language of reason, we shall have you hear the language of violence.' Leopold realised his mistake. From then on he bore Gendebien's warning in mind, and so did his successors.

The result was that of the 2.93 billion francs spent on railroad infrastructure between 1832 and 1912, 68% went to the four Walloon provinces, where only 38% of the population lived. During the same period, the government devoted a total of 4.29 billion francs to transport infrastructure (by land, rail and canals) and harbour works, but only 35.6% went to Flanders and more than 55% to Wallonia. By 1914, the Walloon provinces of Luxemburg (230,000 inhabitants) and Namur (350,000 inhabitants), both boasted 1,200 kilometres of paved roads, while the Flemish province of Antwerp (as large as each of these Walloon provinces, but with 950,000 inhabitants) had only 600 kilometres of these roads. Flanders lagged behind in all areas. The Walloon district of Dinant had 15 post offices more than the equally large Flemish district of Aalst, even though the latter had 100,000 inhabitants more than Dinant.

11 Quoted in Boudens, p. 101, n. 169.

Wallonia was pampered for two reasons. First, its geography made it far less easy to control by an occupational army than the open Flemish flatlands. Wallonia consisted of a long industrial axis in the valley along the Maas and Sambre rivers, surrounded by mountains and the vast Ardennes forests. Secondly, at least when compared with the placid Flemings, the Walloons are a hot-tempered and rebellious 'Latin' people. The Francophone Walloons had risen against King Willem in 1830 in order to join France. Their plans had been thwarted. To appease them, a price had to be paid. The authorities in Brussels bribed Wallonia into complacency: they bought Walloon loyalty to the artificial Belgian state with money they extracted from the Flemings.

Indeed, the bulk of Belgium's tax revenue was used for investments in Wallonia, though most of that revenue came from Flanders. Wallonia accounted for only 30% of the direct and indirect taxes collected between 1832 and 1912. This financial drain had a dramatic effect on the Flemish provinces. In less than three decades Flanders deteriorated from one of Europe's most developed regions to one of its poorest areas. One million emigrants left Flanders after 1850. This was a considerable demographic loss for a people of 5 million. Emigration caused the population of the Flemish provinces to drop from 60% of the Belgian total in 1830 to 53% by 1880. (It rose again to 60% only in the second half of the 20th century).

Even in the most terrible years of destitution and poverty, the Flemings still contributed a disproportionate percentage of Belgium's taxes. The Belgian fiscal system taxed an individual according to the number of inhabitants in the municipality where he lived. Because Flanders (13,708 square kilometres) is a smaller country than Wallonia (15,743 square kilometres) and because it had larger municipalities, its tax burden was substantially heavier.

Another tax advantage for Wallonia was that corporate taxation was virtually non-existent in Belgium. The Belgian industrialists, including the royal family with its stake in the SG, were taxed at only 2% of their gigantic profits. It was not until 1880, after an interruption of half a century, that the industrialisation process began to gain momentum again in Flanders. In 1890, 16.7% of all corporate taxes were paid in Flanders; in 1900, 18.6%; in 1910, 28.4%. When the Walloon tax advantage diminished, the Belgian authorities decided to raise corporate taxes.

Flemish intellectuals who protested against the unfair treatment of their people faced the immediate wrath of the authorities. In the aftermath of the 1830 Revolution, anyone suspected of harbouring

Orangist sympathies had been either dismissed from the civil service or the army, or degraded to inferior positions. This purge removed the entire administrative elite of young Dutch-speaking Flemish intellectuals appointed by King Willem. In 1848, Charles Spilthoorn, a 44-year-old lawyer from Ghent tried to incite an uprising. He was arrested and condemned to death. In 1855, after seven years of imprisonment, Spilthoorn was released on condition that he leave the country: he boarded a ship bound for New York. Another 'revolutionary' was the Catholic priest Benedict Beeckman from Bruges. He was an avowed Orangist and a democrat. In 1848 he founded *Het Brugsche Vrye* (The Bruges Freestate), a journal that campaigned for political rights for the Flemings. He soon ran into trouble with the authorities and with his bishop. As a result, *Het Brugsche Vrye* ceased publication in 1853. Father Beeckman was forced into submission by the Church and died twelve years later in obscurity in Brussels. In 1858, the Brussels poet Michiel Van der Voort refused to pay his taxes. The authorities claimed the taxes in a letter in French, a language Van der Voort did not understand. He was taken to court and condemned for insubordination.

Men of a more cautious nature became the founders of the so-called *Flemish Movement*. As involvement in activities in favour of Flemish political rights was too dangerous, the Flemish Movement initially focused on the cultural emancipation of the Flemish people. Only from the 1860s onwards, did it start to make political demands and its members became known as Flamingants. The Flamingants did not dare to advocate reunification with the Netherlands, but they campaigned for the official recognition of Dutch as the administrative language in the Flemish provinces.

The suppression of the Dutch language in Flanders was most dramatic in the fields of justice and education. The execution in 1860 of Jan Coucke and Peter Goethals, two Flemish labourers who were sentenced to death by a court that had refused to hear them in Dutch, greatly disturbed the Flamingants. In the field of education, all the efforts of King Willem between 1815 and 1830 to fight illiteracy in Flanders were undone. The result was devastating. By 1900, Belgium had a higher proportion of illiterates than any of the neighbouring countries: 10.1% of its army could neither read nor write, against only 2.3% in the Netherlands, 4.7% in France, and 0.5% in Germany (a country extending far into Eastern Europe). Although the 1910 census revealed that 98.4% of the Flemish population spoke Dutch, there was not a single Dutch-language secondary school in the entire country,

apart from one Antwerp school that had been privately established by Marten Rudelsheim and S. Samson, two Jewish Flamingants.

The anti-Flemish policy was felt most severely in Brussels. After the imposed Frenchification during the French occupation of the Southern Netherlands in 1794–1814 and the subsequent influx of French Republican and Bonapartist immigrants, the number of Francophones in the city had risen to five per cent. By 1900, after seventy years of Belgian rule, the number of Francophones in Brussels totalled over half the population. In 1911, two nurses at a Brussels hospital were disciplined for speaking ‘Flemish’ (Dutch) to each other. The doctor who ran the hospital commented: ‘It is already bad enough that we have to tolerate the patients speaking Flemish.’¹² Even primary school children in the rural Flemish countryside were familiar with the violation of the freedom of opinion, education and language in Belgium. In his childhood memoirs the popular Flemish novelist Ernest Claes (1885–1965) describes how he was caned by the headmaster because he had said in class: ‘Flanders is my fatherland.’¹³

Denying the Flemings education in their own language was a means of keeping the Belgian ethnic majority in a minority position. The Church applied this policy as rigorously as the State. It is indicative of the position of the Catholic hierarchy that, while the vast majority of schools in Flanders were run by the Church, the bishops refused to provide any secondary and higher education other than in French. When the Flamingants pleaded with the Church to allow Flemish children to study in their mother tongue, the bishops replied with a document in September 1906, stating that Dutch was ‘unfit as a cultural and scientific language.’ Mgr. Waffelaert, the Bishop of Bruges, added that it was ‘unchristian and against the Catholic principles to aim for a Dutch-language university.’¹⁴

* * *

Albert lacked the shrewdness and the self-confidence of Leopold II, but he had one idea that would be the leitmotiv of his entire reign: he wanted the socialist movement to become the new supporting pillar under the Belgian structure. He understood that if the Socialists were unable to extend their power-base in Flanders, they needed a united and centralised Belgium because this would allow them to use their dominance over Wallonia as a lever to exert power over Flanders and its growing economic potential. Hence, the Socialist Movement was

12 Quoted in *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 30 May 1911.

13 Claes, Ernest, p. 281.

14 Quoted in Boudens, p. 98.

by definition a Belgian-nationalist force. 'Three enemies lie around my throne,' Albert wrote, 'Conservatives who are against the State; Flemish-activists who are against the monarchy and the Belgian Nation; and demagogues who adhere to a certain Catholicism resembling French popular democracies. To hold out against them, I can only count on the support of Socialism, which is national, in favour of Belgian unity, and in favour of centralism – three elements that make it an ally of the dynasty.'¹⁵

In order to get the Socialists into power, the King had to get rid of the Government. Since 1884, the Catholic Party had held an absolute majority in Parliament. The Liberal Party, dominated by the Masonic lodges, was the main opposition party. The Socialists had entered the Chamber of Representatives with 28 seats in 1894, when all Belgian males of 25 and older had been given at least one vote. By 1910 the BWP had grown to 35 MPs. It was assumed that if a *one man, one vote* system were introduced and the plural votes for family fathers, home-owners and educated people abolished, the number of Socialist MPs would rise even further and the Catholic Party might lose its absolute majority in Parliament.

Moreover, Albert's advisors reckoned that democratisation combined with proportional representation would result in greater power for the King. Indeed, whenever a government depending on a parliamentary majority of only one party had a strong leader, as Beernaert had been in the 1880s, the King's political influence was limited. A government depending on a coalition of two or more parties would be inherently weak, and hence the King could pose as an independent arbiter. Thus, it was in the Crown's interest to promote the introduction of a *one man, one vote* principle in a system with as proportional a representation as possible. Such a change to the Constitution, however, required two-thirds of the votes in Parliament. As the Catholic Party was opposed to these reforms, the government of Prime Minister Frans Schollaert had to be toppled first and an alliance forged between Liberals and Socialists.

In 1911, Schollaert came up with a novel idea. He proposed the introduction of school vouchers. Parents would receive a voucher for each child under 15. The voucher was to be handed over to a teacher or a school of their choice. The teacher could then cash the voucher and receive a subsidy from the government. The voucher bill was attacked by the anti-clerical Liberals, who saw it as a sly ploy to give government subsidies to schools run by the clergy. It was also rejected

15 Albert I to Henriette, in Wilmet 1, p. 156.

by the Socialists, who wanted to abolish all private schooling. Their common opposition to the voucher bill provided the ideal opportunity to bring Liberals and Socialists together. When Schollaert presented his bill to Albert to obtain the required royal signature, the King refused to sign. After long and bitter bickering, Schollaert resigned as Prime Minister. The episode made the King very popular amongst the left. When the royal couple paid a visit to Charleroi in November 1911, Socialist activists took to the streets cheering 'Long live the King.' The local Socialist newspaper explained to its readers: "The cry "Long live the King" actually signifies "Long live the delivered people" or "Down with the clergy." These are all synonyms."¹⁶

Schollaert was replaced as Prime Minister by a relatively unknown Catholic politician, Baron Charles de Broqueville, the son of a French aristocrat and a daughter of Leopold I's former hunting companion, Count Camille de Briey. In June 1912, new elections were due. Waxweiler, Jungbluth and Ingenbleek persuaded the Liberal Party leader, Paul Hymans, to join forces with the Socialists and participate in the elections as one political formation. To the amazement of the King and his advisors, however, the Catholics won the elections. They gained 101 seats in the Chamber of Representatives, against 83 for the Liberal-Socialist alliance and two for the Flemish-nationalist Daensists, increasing their majority to 16 seats instead of the previous 6. In Flanders, where many Catholic candidates tended to be anti-militarists sympathising with the Flamingants, the Catholics obtained a clear-cut majority of 61 seats, against only 25 for their opponents. In Wallonia, however, the Liberals and Socialists gained an equally clear-cut majority of 44 seats, against only 28 seats for the Catholics. In Brussels, the Catholics got 12 seats, against 14 for their opponents — a figure roughly corresponding with the number of Flemings and Francophones in the capital.

The elections gave the Catholics a democratic mandate to introduce the voucher system. They received this mandate from a majority of all Belgians, but the Francophones were not prepared to accept this. In Liège, there was a popular outcry against the Flemings. 'There is much talk here of a separation from Flanders,' a correspondent from Liège warned Hymans in Brussels. The Walloon anti-Semite and Socialist MP, Jules Destrée, wrote an open letter to the King, stating that the Flemings were becoming ever more demanding in Belgium. 'Sire, allow me to tell you the truth, the large and horrifying truth: *il n'y a pas de Belges!*' Destrée exclaimed, and he argued in favour of

16 *Le Journal de Charleroi*, 17 Nov. 1911.

introducing federalism as a means to neutralise the Flemish democratic majority within Belgium. Albert told Ingenbleek: 'What Destrée says is true enough, but it is no less true that an administrative separation will lead to far greater inconveniences and dangers than the present situation.'¹⁷ For the sake of national unity, the King wanted the Catholics to renounce their democratic mandate.

Ingenbleek was sent to see Broqueville. Pale and in tears, he said: 'I beg you, save the King!'¹⁸ Broqueville did as he was asked. The voucher bill was buried and never mentioned again. George Helleputte, the new Minister of Agriculture and Public Works, who was a moderate Flammingant, was very critical of the King: 'It is always the politics of the Court to weaken the Catholic Party and to ally itself with the so-called moderate Liberal Left,' he wrote in his diary. The collaboration of the royal entourage with the Socialists went so far that in 1913 the King's men secretly paid the BWP one million francs to organise a general strike in favour of the one man, one vote electoral system. Belgian Catholic politicians did not dare to criticise the King, but when Albert visited Switzerland shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, they had the Swiss Catholic newspaper *La Liberté* attack 'the pontiffs of Socialism' reigning at the Belgian royal palace.¹⁹

* * *

At Laken, Albert acquainted his three children — Leopold, the Duke of Brabant, Charles, the Count of Flanders, and their sister Marie-José — with their future duties. He took them along to all kinds of ceremonies. The children were often bored to death. Equally boring were the hours spent with their mother. The music-mad Elisabeth played the violin every morning from eleven to half past twelve. The little princes had to sit on the sofa and keep still. The Queen, who was very authoritarian and demanding, wanted them 'to learn how to listen.' From an early age, they were taught to play the piano and the violin. Other studies were deemed less important and even harmful, because, according to Elisabeth, studying 'distorts the instinct.' They received no religious instruction, either. 'My parents were extremely discrete about everything related to religion,' Marie-José wrote in her memoirs. '*Ask the chamber maids*, my father told me when I once questioned him about an image of the crucifixion.'²⁰ Albert, however, made sure that Leopold and Charles were introduced to his own

17 Albert I to Ingenbleek, 30 Aug. 1912, in Albert I 2, p. 435.

18 Albert I 2, p. 391.

19 Albert I 2, p. 499.

20 Quoted in Marie-José, pp. 59, 62–3.

philosophy and the things he valued. The boys were taught world history according to Brück's Law and learned to count using Lagrange's calculations based on the pyramid of Cheops.

Albert and Elisabeth were not only demanding with regard to their children. The Queen was also extremely authoritarian towards her staff. Once, the poet Emile Verhaeren, whom Elisabeth often invited to the palace because she liked him, gave the manuscript of one of his poems as a gift to the governess of Princess Marie-José. Apparently, Verhaeren fancied her at least as much as the Queen. Elisabeth, who had noticed this, confiscated the manuscript from the governess as soon as the poet had left.

Apart from music, the Queen devoted her time to painting and sculpting. Ornithology was another passion. Elisabeth was mad about birds, and especially about their 'music,' which to her was literally of a divine order. 'Bird songs = cosmic music,' she wrote, 'the bird = the Holy Spirit, the spiritual side of man.'²¹ She wanted to discover the divine messages of her feathered friends, and she tried to 'talk' to the birds, taking these efforts very seriously. In 1938, the Queen hired an entire BBC-team to record birdsong in the royal park at Laken. The BBC people worked day and night for weeks, and recorded 35 species. This resulted in a collection of 250 gramophone discs, the equivalent of 50 CDs today. The Queen sent a compilation to politicians, foreign embassies and musicians. 'We still listen to the Birds of Laeken,' the British ambassador wrote many years later, 'the whole thing is very funny and always a source of joy.'²²

To Be or Not To Be Neutral

Belgium was a neutral country. Unlike other neutral countries, its neutrality was involuntary. The Treaty of London of 1831 prohibited it from joining any military alliance. Britain had imposed this neutrality on Brussels because it feared that Belgium would ally itself with France. In return, the British agreed to guarantee Belgium's independence, which obliged them to go to war with any country violating Belgium's borders. The Flemish majority of the Belgians favoured this neutrality. The only advantage of being a Belgian, was that one never had to fight or die for Belgium. 'This nation,' Albert complained to Prime Minister Broqueville in June 1912, 'guards what it pretends to be a liberty: not to have to defend itself.'²³

21 RAB SAE nr. 621.

22 RAB SAE, Knatchbull-Hugessen to Elisabeth, 3 Feb. 1957.

23 Albert I to Broqueville, 22 June 1912, in Albert I 2, p. 426.

The majority of Broqueville's Catholic Party, as well as the Flamings, were fervently neutralist and anti-militarist. Most of the Belgian Francophones, however, were both militarist and anti-neutralist. They considered the prohibition preventing Belgium from joining a military alliance with France a limitation of Belgium's sovereignty. The Liberal leader Paul Hymans was their main spokesman, but Emile Vandervelde, the leader of the Socialist BWP, also belonged to this group. Both Hymans and Vandervelde had Flemish grandparents who had moved to Brussels where the Frenchification process had transformed their grandchildren into Francophones. Like many Frenchified Belgians of Flemish descent, they considered Dutch an inferior language of uneducated people, as their own grandfathers had been. This group of middle-class civil servants living in Brussels formed the hard-core Belgian nationalists. They were no Walloons and had ceased to be Flemings; their only identity was Belgian.

The King was the only Belgian militarist who did not belong to the pro-French group. He wanted a strong Belgian army but wished to remain neutral as well. To Albert, the only thing that mattered in case of a Franco-German war, was to stay out of it, or end it on the winning side, whichever side that might be. As Belgium was an entirely artificial country, the risk was that if the King backed the wrong side and ended up with the losers, the victors would simply abolish his kingdom after the war. When Albert left for a visit to Potsdam in November 1913, Baron Léon Van der Elst advised him to tell the Kaiser that Belgium intended to defend itself in case of military aggression. The King did not do this. He told Van der Elst: 'I am not that much in favour of Germany myself, but one has to take into consideration what is in the interest of our country.'²⁴ Hence, all options had to be kept open.

The Belgian general staff, however, was not much impressed by Germany's military power. A bunch of conceited Francophiles, they reckoned that the German troops would be vastly inferior to the Belgian and French armies. Some even hoped for a German attack on Belgium, which would allow them to counterattack towards Cologne and Trier and occupy the entire Rhineland. 'Such an offensive is within our means' stated a secret report of the Belgian general staff in the summer of 1913.²⁵

The First World War began when Austria declared war on Serbia on 28 June 1914. Tensions rose between France and Germany. The *Kaiser*

24 Albert I 2, p. 449.

25 Quoted in Albert I 2, p. 88.

presented Brussels with an ultimatum on the evening of 2 August: Belgium had to allow a free passage to the German army on its way to France. At two minutes past eight on the morning of 4 August, German troops crossed the Belgian border. In London, later that morning, the British Cabinet, with fifteen votes against two and four abstentions, declared war on Germany.

Albert issued a proclamation to call his people to arms. He addressed himself explicitly to 'Flemings' and 'Walloons.' It was the first time ever that a Belgian King called directly upon the Flemish people. It was generally interpreted as a promise that if the Flemings fought loyally for Belgium, they would be granted their rights within the Belgian framework once the war was over. Consequently, even Flamingsants volunteered to fight for the King.

According to Article 68 of the Belgian Constitution, the King is not only the theoretical Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, but he actively commands them in the field when the country is at war. As a result, Albert was the only head of state in Western Europe personally to lead the military operations of his country's army. Not even the *Kaiser* did this. In Britain, the royal prerogatives are diminished in case of war,²⁶ in Belgium they are enlarged. Contrary to his peacetime political competence, a Belgian King does not need the approval of either Government or Parliament for his wartime decisions. When the very existence of the artificial Belgian state is at risk, it is the King, and he alone, who decides about the country's fate. Though this may seem an odd rule, there is some logic behind it: as the King is the person whose private fortune depends most directly on Belgium's existence, he is the man that can best be trusted to uphold the artificial Belgian construction.

Albert and his generals soon discovered that the Germans' military strength was vastly superior. Instead of marching victoriously on Cologne and Trier, the Belgian field army, 117,000 men strong, was forced to retreat. Two weeks into the war, the field army had dwindled to 90,000 men, not only through casualties, but also through defections. Albert wrote to Broqueville on 14 August that the army was undisciplined; that the privates did not salute their officers; that they were incapable of marching. 'After ten kilometres, the soldiers are exhausted. They all complain they have sore feet.'²⁷ It took General Scheere's men five hours to cover a distance of barely ten miles, without luggage! The Belgian defences collapsed. Brussels fell with-

26 Hardie, pp. 141-3.

27 Albert I to Broqueville, 14 Aug. 1914, in Albert I 2, p. 515.

out putting up a fight on 20 August. By the end of August, Albert withdrew with the field army to Antwerp. It had been reduced to 70,000 men. Antwerp, however, had a city garrison of another 70,000 men.

In early September, the Germans turned their attention to France and ignored the Belgians, apart from an occasional bombardment of Antwerp with zeppelins. Queen Elisabeth left the city for Britain with the royal children and 200 million francs in gold. The Queen was not the only fugitive: twenty per cent of the Belgians fled abroad in the autumn of 1914. Of the entire Belgian population of 7.6 million, one million went to the Netherlands and almost half a million to Britain and France. Ninety per cent of those who had fled to the Netherlands later returned; those in Britain and France were unable to do so. As a consequence, 8 per cent of the Belgians spent the First World War outside Belgium. Two-thirds of them were Flemings.

When, after the battle of the Marne, the Germans turned on Antwerp in early October, the King lost heart. He decided to give himself up as a prisoner to the *Kaiser*. A shocked Broqueville protested violently; Ingenbleek also tried to make the King change his mind; even Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, came to Antwerp on 3 October to encourage Albert. Luckily, Elisabeth had returned as well. On 6 October, she was able to talk him round. Victory might still come, as the Flemish provinces to the West of the River Scheldt had not been conquered yet.

The royal couple and the field army left Antwerp for Ostend in the early hours of 7 October. The Antwerp garrison remained in town. After the King had left, 30,000 soldiers from the garrison fled to the Netherlands. The remainder surrendered to the enemy on 10 October. Meanwhile, the King's forces, rapidly dwindling to 55,000 men through defections, were in a chaotic state. The officers were all Francophones, while the Flemings made up the lower ranks. As the latter were commanded in French, frequent misunderstandings occurred. Artillerists who received the French order '*Visez la meule*' (Shoot at the haystack) dutifully destroyed a nearby mill ('*meulen*' in their native tongue).²⁸

The only Belgian success during the campaign was the achievement of the royal propaganda department. German atrocities were emphasised and exploited to the full. A decade earlier the royal propaganda staff had appreciated how effectively Leopold II's adversaries had exploited the pictures of children with their hands cut off. Now they

28 This and other examples can be found in Vanacker 2, pp. 30–43.

concocted stories of German soldiers chopping off the hands of little Belgians and used these to win international sympathy for Albert's cause.

After the Belgians had evacuated Ostend on 15 October, the King went to the little coastal village of De Panne, the last hamlet before the French border. He settled in the Villa Maskens, literally the last house on Belgian soil, situated in the dunes. Albert was determined to await the arrival of the Germans and to surrender. He forbade Belgian soldiers to cross the border and continue fighting the *Kaiser* from France. They had to give themselves up with him. According to Albert, Belgium had merely defended its own territory against aggression, but it had never joined the Allied side. He hoped that this argument would persuade Berlin to allow him to keep his kingdom.

Broqueville disagreed. He wished to continue the war together with the Allies. He argued that constitutionally the King could not surrender without the approval of the Government. Albert replied that according to the Constitution the King was the Commander-in-Chief of the army and could do as he pleased. Two simple Flemish civilians, however, saved the day. They suggested flooding the Yser estuary, to create a water barrier of one mile wide between the Belgians and the enemy. Water was the only natural defence the Dutch people (in Holland as well as in Flanders) had ever had. In the 16th century they had used a water barrier against the Spanish; now the Belgians used water to stop the German advance. The flood gates were opened on 27 October, submerging the Flemish meadows. Hence, the German offensive came to a halt less than ten miles to the east of Albert's residence on the Franco-Belgian border.

The danger now came from the south: 25 miles from De Panne lay the medieval town of Ieper (Ypres), unprotected by water. The Belgians had fled Ieper on 7 October, allowing a German cavalry unit to enter the town. The British were able to recapture Ieper on 13 October. They held on to it during the following four weeks at the heavy toll of 58,000 men. In the spring of 1915, the Germans launched a new offensive against Ieper. The second battle of Ieper cost the British and Canadians another 59,000 men. The Belgians took no part in the battles around Ieper. They defended the submerged front of 24 miles between the sea and Diksmuide, 7 miles to the north of Ieper.

During the following years, the Belgians remained passive onlookers of the war. They gradually built up their military strength by enlisting all men in the small area that was left of Belgium and with volunteers who arrived via Holland. They numbered 79,000 men in December 1915, and 167,000 men by the autumn of 1918 when male

Belgian fugitives in France and Britain had also been enlisted. But the Belgians hardly fought during the entire war. Albert pretended that, as he was 'neutral,' he had nothing to do with the conflict between Berlin on the one hand and Paris and London on the other.

Compared to the military losses of other belligerents, Belgium suffered relatively little. Proportionally its death toll was about seven times less than that of the Allies. Only 41,000 Belgian soldiers died (0.6% of the population), against 700,000 for the British Isles (1.75%), 1.5 million for France (3.5%), and 1.95 million for Germany (3%). Of the Belgian casualties, one-third perished through disease. Less than 27,000 actually fell on the battle field. There were also 6,500 Belgian civilian war casualties.

* * *

Albert and Elisabeth remained in De Panne throughout the war. Their three children lived in Britain. The King had asked Lord Curzon, a member of the British war cabinet, to look after them. Curzon was the widower of Mary Leiter, the daughter of a Jewish Chicago real estate magnate. He had three daughters, the only heirs to the Leiter business empire. As soon as the Belgian princes 'invaded' Hackwood, Curzon's Hampshire mansion, the quiet life of the girls was over. On noticing Bobby, the dog of Curzon's youngest daughter Ba-Ba (Alexandra), Charles at once gave it a treacherous kick, while Marie-José pulled its tail. Cimmie (Cynthia) Curzon, the second daughter, threw a picture of the *Kaiser* on the floor and invited the Belgian guests to trample on 'this grandson of Queen Victoria.' Leopold immediately fell in love with the hot-blooded girl of sixteen. Irene Curzon, nineteen, and the meticulous lady of the house since her mother had died, had a hard time keeping everything in check, especially when Charles and Marie-José spilled oil paint all over their room. Lord Curzon's nerves were sorely tried. One night, he had a nightmare. In his dream, he saw the Belgian princes kick his precious antique Greek statues to pieces, while he tried to stop them but could not.²⁹

Occasionally, the children were allowed to go to De Panne to meet their parents. Elisabeth was staying with Albert at the Villa Maskens. The only permanent resident at the Villa was the Belgian Chief of Staff, General Emile Galet. Four years older than the King, he was one of Albert's best friends. The royal couple received many visitors. Albert and Elisabeth became immensely popular in the Allied press.

29 Marie-José, p. 195.

The Belgian propaganda portrayed them as mythical figures. Albert complained that he had far too many visitors, and he did not like all of them. Baron Léon Lambert, a Belgian banker and an in-law of the Rothschilds, he found 'a real Jew and a snob.'³⁰

Despite his popularity in the Allied countries, Albert blamed them for the position he was in. On 17 April 1915, he wrote in his diary: 'The Allies have not served us well. Though the Germans have violated their obligations towards us, the others have not been able to keep them.' Colonel Eugène Génie, the French military attaché at De Panne, sensed the King's resentment. The Frenchman, whom Elisabeth in her diary described as 'a false dog,'³¹ reported to Paris: 'The King, supreme commander of the army, is not up to his present heavy responsibilities. Not only is he technically incapable of leading an army, but, what is worse, he completely lacks the character and the temperament which is indispensable for doing so.'³²

Albert decided to enter into secret negotiations with the Germans. If the *Kaiser* would reinstate him in Brussels, Albert was prepared to withdraw from the war. In the autumn of 1915, he wrote in his diary that the Allies were destined for 'total defeat.' 'In the Central Empires, there is discipline and unity, while on the Allied side everything depends on the politicians, on irresponsible and incapable men. The sovereigns of England and Russia are nonentities,' who 'allow Parliaments – already totally incapable in times of peace – to take decisions at decisive moments when the vision and the energy of a superior man is needed.' Albert was particularly harsh on 'the incredible vanity of the English,' while 'France allows itself to be abused by England.' 'If only France would understand that it is not in her interest to spill her blood to serve the egotistical aims of the English with regard to the Continent.' Belgium had to detach itself from London and Paris. 'For us, it is more than time to focus our attention on the means by which to recover the territories that the Allies are unable to conquer.'³³

Albert's unilateral peace negotiations started in September 1915. He used two maternal aunts of Elisabeth as his intermediaries. They came to De Panne for so-called family visits. The Duchess of Bourbon-Parma came in September. Her sister, the Countess of Bardi, arrived in late October. The Countess brought a message from Albert's brother-in-law, the German diplomat Count Hans Törring,

30 RAB KAD, 5 Mar. 1916.

31 Elisabeth's diary, 30 Sept. 1914, quoted in Marie-José, p. 161.

32 Génie, in Albert I 3, p. 81.

33 RAB KAD, 17 Oct., 12, 17 and 25 Nov. 1915.

the husband of Elisabeth's sister Sophie. Except for General Galet and Emile Waxweiler, the entire royal staff was sent away during the aunts' visits. While the Countess of Bardi waited, Albert and Waxweiler worked on a letter to the Germans. 'The contacts between London and Brussels have been cold and distrustful for twenty years,' the King wrote. Before the war, 'public opinion, while really hostile to England, was not unfavourable to Germany, despite a press campaign in favour of France, which I disapproved of and fought.'³⁴

On 24 and 25 November, Törring and Waxweiler secretly met at Zürich in Switzerland. After the first round of talks, Törring went to Berlin for instructions and met Waxweiler again for a second round on 29 November. The Belgian government knew nothing of this, nor did the Allies. In England, however, Lord Curzon was worried. Albert had sent Curzon a pessimistic letter on 8 November. 'The powerful countries on the Allied side lack unity of direction, practical sense in action and a clear sight of the real situation of the war. That leads to complete defeat,' it said.³⁵ Curzon showed the letter to Herbert Asquith, the British Prime Minister. Asquith concluded that the King was depressed because London was not doing enough to reconquer Belgium. He at once ordered the preparation of a plan for a large-scale military offensive in Flanders.

Meanwhile, Waxweiler had returned to De Panne with the news that Berlin wanted Belgium to abandon its neutrality and become a German ally. Berlin also demanded that, in post-war Belgium, Flanders should have its own civil administration separate from Wallonia. The King could agree to the first demand, but not to the second. In a letter to Törring on 10 December he told his brother-in-law that he refused to negotiate any further if the Germans did not accept the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of Belgium. Berlin subsequently dropped its pro-Flemish demand, but insisted on Albert becoming their military ally. But if he joined the German side, he risked losing the Congo. Albert feared that the British would take his colony. To avoid this, he had to involve Britain in his peace negotiations with Germany.

The King wrote Curzon a letter on 8 December to invite him over to De Panne. 'I am always more and more convinced that the Western front will remain unmoved,' he said. Albert wanted to imply that the only way out of the quagmire was a negotiated Peace. Curzon did not grasp the implicit message, because the letter also stressed that the

34 Albert I to Törring, 30 Oct. 1915, in *Albert I* 2, p. 605.

35 Quoted in *Albert I* 2, p. 617.

King remained confident in Britain's power: 'The rumours on our less sympathetic feelings towards England are entirely deprived of foundation,' he wrote, 'I keep an entire faith in the future and the power of Great Britain.'³⁶

A new round of negotiations between Waxweiler and Törring took place in Zürich on 5 and 6 January. Apart from Germany now accepting Belgium's internal autonomy, Waxweiler returned empty-handed. On 7 February Albert received Curzon and Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig at De Panne. They talked for almost three hours, but, to the King's annoyance, mainly about military issues. Curzon and Haig proposed a huge British military offensive in Flanders: a massive land strike from Ieper in the direction of Passendale. They were amazed when the King rejected the plans. They asked him what offensive he had in mind then, and were even more amazed to discover that he rejected every offensive on Belgian soil. At the end of the meeting, the King confronted Curzon with the question that he had been longing to ask all along: was there any basis for an agreement between Germany and England? Curzon does not make any reference to this question in his own report of the meeting,³⁷ but in his war diary Albert writes extensively about the answer he received. It came as a cold shower. 'No,' the Englishman had said, 'there will be no agreement. What is at stake in this war is British supremacy. We will never lay down arms.'³⁸

Waxweiler and Törring resumed their talks in Switzerland on 25 and 26 February, but with Britain occupying Germany's African colonies, and London eager to continue the war, the situation was deadlocked. It was their last meeting. Waxweiler's constant travelling between De Panne and Zürich had raised the suspicion of the French secret service. Four months later, the 51-year-old Belgian whom Albert wanted to have as his post-war Prime Minister was run over by a taxi in Le Havre. He died on the spot.

The Foe of the Flamingants

In Berlin, the Kaiser decided to put his Belgian cousin under pressure. On 5 April 1916, the German Chancellor, Count Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, announced in the *Reichstag* that Germany would grant the Flemings everything Belgium had always denied them. Until the beginning of 1916, the Germans had kept the Flamingants at a dis-

36 Quoted in Albert I 2, p. 626-7.

37 PRO Cab. 37/142, Curzon to British Cabinet, 8 Feb. 1916.

38 RAB KAD, 7 and 8 Feb. 1916.

tance. The Flemings had been wary of the invaders as well. A group of Flamingant fugitives in the Netherlands had founded the newspaper *De Vlaamsche Stem* (The Flemish Voice), expressing strong anti-German indignation. The paper was smuggled into occupied Belgium. On 11 July 1915, the editors organised a meeting in Bussum near Amsterdam. They sent a telegram to the King in De Panne. 'The thousands of Flemings assembled at Bussum pay homage to Your Majesty, trusting your high wisdom to safeguard an autonomous Flanders in an independent Belgium,' it said in Dutch.

When Albert received the telegram, he refused to acknowledge it. The editors, Alberic Deswarte and René De Clercq, supposing that they had offended the King by addressing him in Dutch, sent a second telegram with the same message in French. Albert informed Broqueville that, 'as I was offended' by the first telegram, 'I did not answer it. Now I have received one in French. I think it useful to answer them by teaching them a lesson.'³⁹ A reply was sent, deliberately not signed by the King, but by Ingenbleek, to 'Deswaerte and Declercq' (misspelling both their names) stating: 'H. M. is of the opinion that once the Nation will have recovered its sovereignty, the constituted authorities will take all measures to safeguard the aspirations and interests of the Belgian people. Meanwhile, the King calls urgently on all the Belgians to have no aim but the liberation of the country's territory.'

The reply did not mention the Flemish people and only referred to 'Belgians.' The editors were greatly disappointed. Fewer than three months later, Albert had De Clercq, who was also a teacher at the Belgian School in Amsterdam, dismissed from the school for 'unpatriotic activities.' In private letters to Broqueville, the Minister of Education acknowledged, however, that De Clercq was 'a patriot and a royalist who could not be reproached for anything.'⁴⁰

As a direct result of the King's hostile reaction, the Flamingant movement, which until then had been loyal to Belgium, split into two groups: the *Passivists* and the *Aktivists*. The Passivists, led by the Catholic MP Frans Van Cauwelaert, believed that nothing should be attempted until after the war ended. The Aktivists concluded that the King would never be prepared to give Flanders just treatment, that Belgium was Flanders' real enemy and that, since the enemy of one's enemy is one's friend, it should actively ally itself with Germany. Many Flamingants, including De Clercq, returned home, prepared to

39 GSA Broqueville Papers, Albert I to Broqueville, 13 July 1915.

40 GSA Broqueville Papers nr. 182, Poulet to Broqueville, 10 Sept. 1915.

collaborate with the Germans. A worried Van Cauwelaert asked the King for an urgent audience; he travelled from Holland to De Panne via England and France, but Albert refused to receive him.

By the end of 1915, at the same time that Albert was secretly negotiating with Berlin, the Aktivists approached the Germans. They were a heterogeneous group: one of their leaders was an anti-militarist Protestant vicar from Ghent, Jan Domela-Nieuwenhuis-Nyegaard; others were Catholic Conservatives, such as August Borms and René De Clercq; Communist revolutionaries, like Joseph Van Extergem; and Zionist Jews, such as Marten Rudelsheim, Maurice Friedman and Lode Oudkerk. Another Jew, the Antwerp diamond trader, Salomon Kok, financed Aktivist organisations and publications.

The Aktivists achieved a great deal. All Belgian laws were translated into Dutch. For the first time since 1830 Flemish municipalities were administered in Dutch. Children again received education in their mother tongue. The University of Ghent, until then a Franco-phone institution, became a Dutch-language university. In February 1917, the Aktivists opened their own Parliament, the Council of Flanders. However, when the Council of Flanders proclaimed the Flemish Declaration of Independence on 22 December 1917, Berlin censored it. New negotiations were being conducted with King Albert, who, once again, seemed prepared to change allegiance to the German side. Hence, the *Kaiser* wanted to give his cousin a second chance and had the Flamings silenced.

Albert had been brooding over new solutions for his Congo problem, the colony which he was bound to lose if he became a German ally. Perhaps the United States, still neutral in 1916, could help. He invited Colonel Edward House, an envoy of President Woodrow Wilson, to De Panne on 8 February 1916 in order to kindle American interest in Africa. When House suggested that the King sell the Congo to the Germans, Albert realised that he would have to corrupt the Americans in the same way that the Belgians had been corrupted to defend the interests of their artificial nation: by making it financially rewarding to do so. He wrote to Broqueville: 'Let us draw the attention of the Americans to our colony by giving them huge concessions. They must have something to gain from our retention of all our possessions. Let us give that powerful Republic a very good reason to immerse itself in African politics.'⁴¹ Broqueville, unaware of the King's secret dealings with the Germans, did not understand why the Congo was suddenly an issue on the King's mind and made no special

41 GSA Broqueville Papers, Albert I to Broqueville, 4 Mar. 1916.

efforts to welcome the Americans to the colony. Albert became utterly dissatisfied with the Prime Minister. He told him that he did not want to see him anymore. If Broqueville had something to say, he had to do so in writing, as 'one letter teaches me more than ten conversations.'⁴²

In the autumn of 1916, the Franco-British military debacle at the River Somme, which cost them 600,000 men (and the Germans 'only' 470,000), strengthened Albert's conviction that Germany was about to win the war. He contacted Berlin again. This time, the secret negotiations went through the Marquess of Villalobar, the Spanish Ambassador to Belgium. Germany reaffirmed that it was prepared to respect Belgium's internal autonomy, though Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg remained sceptical about Albert's ability to decide in favour of the German side. The Chancellor wrote to King Ferdinand of Bulgaria, a German ally and a Saxe-Coburg cousin of Albert, that the Belgian King 'is under close surveillance of English and French troops and is also in disaccord with his own government. Hence, he cannot impose his own initiatives.'⁴³

Albert's position became even more complicated when the United States joined the war on the Allied side in April 1917. This made his Congo scheme impossible. But it also worried him for another reason. President Wilson had proclaimed that every nation, however small, was entitled to self-determination. The King feared that the Americans would see no difference between the Flemings' right to independence and that of the Poles. He believed that if the Flamingants put their case to Wilson, they might gain his support. The King's only hope to avoid this danger was an early peace treaty between Germany and the Allies, before the Americans became too influential. He asked Emile Vandervelde, the leader of the Belgian Socialists, to have his comrades in various countries pressure their governments into peace negotiations. Vandervelde and Albert were political allies. The King had every reason to be satisfied with the Socialist leader. Within the Cabinet, he was, together with the anti-Flemish hardliners Paul Hymans and Henri Carton de Wiart, demanding the death penalty for Flamingant soldiers who were assumed to be undermining army discipline.

Indeed, apart from the Passivists and the Aktivists in the Netherlands and German-occupied Belgium, there was a third group of Flamingants: the *Frontists*. These were men serving on the front in

42 CSA Broqueville Papers, Albert I to Broqueville, 7 July 1916.

43 Bethmann-Hollweg to King Ferdinand of Bulgaria, 16 Oct. 1916, in Willequet 4, p. 170.

King Albert's army. Some of them had signed up as volunteers after the King's explicit call to arms of 'the Flemings' in August 1914. Once in the army, however, they grew bitterly disappointed about the way they were treated. Others were young Flemings, previously uninterested in politics, who became Flamings while serving because they felt humiliated by their Francophone officers. Although 80% of the privates were Flemings, there were hardly any Dutch-speaking officers. The staff of 5,000 officers consisted almost entirely of Walloons.

To make matters worse, many of the Francophone officers deliberately pestered their Flemish subordinates. Some of the highest ranking Belgian officers, such as General Jules Jacques, to whom Albert gave the title of Baron Jacques de Dixmude in 1915, had learned their trade by committing crimes against humanity as commissaries in King Leopold's CFS. General Jacques was a sadist who in the Congo had aimed, as he himself put it, for 'the absolute submission or the complete extermination of the natives.'⁴⁴ In Belgium, the army did not aim to exterminate the Flemings, but it did its best to achieve absolute submission. At the military training camp of Honfleur, Walloon privates were allowed to march with empty rucksacks, while the Flemings had to carry stones in theirs. Private Jules Billiaert, who did not understand a French order, was told that 'in Africa even the niggers understand their orders' and was sentenced to one week in gaol for insubordination. When Corporal Karel De Schaeplrijver, a lawyer, asked permission to speak Dutch while defending a Flemish soldier at a court-martial, the military judge told him: 'You can speak Hebrew if it pleases you; the result will be exactly the same.' Father Robert Mortier, a Jesuit army chaplain who had prayed the Lord's Prayer in Dutch during a funeral, was told that he fomented discord with his 'Flamingant and separatist propaganda.' He was removed from his post and sent to work in an ammunition factory in France.⁴⁵ Many officers regarded all Flemings as Germanophiles and began to speak of 'Flamingoths' or 'Flamboches' — *Goth* and *Boche* being French terms of abuse for a German. Military censors carefully scrutinised all Dutch-language publications. Even a poem by the late author Guido Gezelle was censored: the words 'dear Flanders' had to be omitted. As a rule, the army censored all references to Flanders which did not mention Belgium as well. The situation can be likened today to one

44 Jacques to Post Chief at Inongo, reprinted in *The West African Mail*, 16 Mar. 1906.

45 These and similar examples can be found in Vanacker 2, pp. 61, 212, 223–4, 239, 251, 283.

where all references to England or Britain that do not simultaneously mention Europe would be prohibited.

From 1915 onwards, groups of disillusioned Flemish soldiers began to organise themselves in what they called the *Front Movement*. In August 1917, the leaders of the Movement were rounded up and deported to Belgian prison camps and penal colonies in France. Life in the camps was worse than in the trenches. Ten per cent of the inmates died. Dr. Alfons Van de Perre, who led an official committee to investigate living conditions at Fresnes, a Belgian army prison not far from Paris, wrote: 'The prisoners do not know when they will be released. They live in filth, they do not get half the food ration needed to survive, many suffer from consumption, many go insane. Many die. It is awful. It is a disgrace. Our prisoners of war get better treatment in Germany.'⁴⁶

While the Belgian authorities were rounding up the leaders of the Front Movement, the British were fighting the third battle of Ieper. From August to November 1917, they advanced six miles to the north into the hamlet of Passendale. It cost them 245,000 men. The fact that Albert kept his troops out of any offensives explains why many Flemish soldiers remained royalist, despite the discrimination and humiliations they had to suffer in the army. Even the most ardent Flamings were grateful that the King had refused to participate in the British attack. In Flanders fields, having to undergo the humiliations of the Belgian authorities as the Flemings did, was preferable to having to die for Belgium like rats, as the poor British did. Even the Frontists never criticised Albert in person. They began to hate Belgium as it hated them, but they thanked God for its king.

* * *

With the declaration of Flanders' independence by the Aktivists on 22 December 1917, the genie was out of the bottle. The Germans tried in vain to keep the declaration secret. Finally, on 19 January 1918, they allowed the publication of a censored version, which spoke of Flemish 'autonomy' instead of 'independence.' Soon, the news reached De Panne. 'The Council of Flanders is about to declare (or might already have done so) the independence of Flanders and announce a referendum on the subject. This news has greatly shocked the government,' Albert wrote in his war diary.⁴⁷ He called the cabinet over to meet him. 'We have all been scandalised by the news of the formation of a

46 Quoted in Deleu, vol. I, p. 540.

47 RAB KAD, 25 Jan. 1918.

Flemish government that declares itself autonomous. We have also received the news that a popular consultation will be held about the question of Flemish independence. These are events of which the gravity cannot be denied,' he told the ministers.⁴⁸

The declaration of Flemish independence made Albert look for moderate Flamings who were prepared to accept Flemish autonomy within a Belgian framework. Van Cauwelaert, the leader of the Passivist Flamings, was called over from Amsterdam. Albert asked him what concessions were needed to prevent the Flemings from breaking with Belgium altogether. Van Cauwelaert voiced three demands: the introduction after the war of Dutch-language education at all levels, including at university level; the establishment of a Dutch-language civil administration and of Dutch-language courts in Flanders; and the immediate division of the army into separate Flemish and Walloon regiments. Albert and his advisors discussed these demands at length. They concluded that though the first two demands could be accepted, the third demand was entirely out of the question. 'I have the feeling, if not the certainty, that the Walloons are not going to accept this passively,' Albert said. 'Especially the officers will be profoundly troubled.'⁴⁹

Amongst the Flemish soldiers in the trenches, the news stirred up emotions. It led to dozens of spontaneous demonstrations. Officers trying to stop the demonstrations were beaten up by their men. One soldier who had attacked a Sergeant was court-martialled. Despite requests for mercy, he was executed. 'There have been demonstrations and the number of leaflets keeps growing,' a worried Albert wrote in his diary. The King was realistic enough to see that 'it would be wrong to believe that the enemy has fomented this wave of unrest; given the Belgian character, an influence from abroad can achieve nothing here or only very little.'⁵⁰ Albert was not prepared to take responsibility for the order to open fire on demonstrating soldiers. The Government had to do this. 'Discipline is fading,' he told the Cabinet. 'Concessions have to be made. If not, an inexorably harsh repression might be necessary to restore order. Are you unanimously prepared, in the present situation, to approve and support such a repression?'⁵¹ Hymans and Vandervelde answered assertively, but the Catholic ministers hesitated.

48 Cabinet meeting, 1 Feb. 1918, in Albert I 3, p. 446.

49 Preparatory notes for the cabinet meeting of 1 Feb. 1918, in Albert I 3, p. 443.

50 RAB KAD, 6 Mar. 1918.

51 Cabinet meeting, 20 Mar. 1918, in Albert I 3, p. 452.

The King's troubles deepened when the Germans began two new offensives, one military, the other diplomatic. A large-scale German attack, that began on 21 March, dealt severe blows to the Allies, who were forced back 40 miles along the Somme. At the same time, Count Törring re-emerged on the scene. Albert's brother-in-law contacted Fernand Peltzer, the Belgian Ambassador in Bern. Peltzer and Törring met a first time on 27 March.

Given the strength of the German military offensive, London and Paris asked the King to join an Allied counterattack. Albert refused. The French President Raymond Poincaré, the French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau and the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George all came to De Panne in efforts to talk Albert round. They failed. When Broqueville tried to do the same, the King decided to rid himself of the Prime Minister. Broqueville was forced to resign on 24 May. Albert's new Prime Minister was Gérard Cooreman, the Governor of the SG, a man totally subservient to the King.

Peltzer and Törring met again on 30 June. Albert had finally decided in favour of a separate Belgo-German peace. On 10 July, the new German Chancellor, Count Georg von Hertling, made the necessary overtures. He announced in the *Reichstag* that Germany would guarantee Belgium's independence and integrity. The Council of Flanders, the Aktivist Parliament in German-occupied Belgium, was prohibited from convening again. That same day, General Galet, still living with the King at the Villa Maskens, wrote: 'We are convinced that Germany will give us our country back and that it will be happy to pay that price in return for peace. France will continue the war in order to conquer the Alsace-Lorraine province, and England in order to assure its world prestige. These are the war goals of the big nations for which we are not prepared to spill one drop of Belgian blood.'⁵²

A week later, however, there was a dramatic turn of events. On 18 July, the British and French succeeded in stopping the German advance. Albert decided to wait and see how things developed. On 2 August, the French won the second battle of the Marne; on 8 August, British troops dealt a severe blow to the exhausted Germans near Amiens. Soon German resistance collapsed on all fronts. On 26 September, Albert put the Belgian army under Allied command. He was no longer 'neutral.' The final Allied offensive started on 29 September. It was the first offensive of the war in which the Belgians participated. The Belgian army put the most militantly Flamingant

52 Galet manuscript, 10 July 1918, in Albert I 3, p. 157.

regiments in the first line. As General Honoré Drubbel said, they were to erase 'the regimental dishonour' with their blood.

On 17 October, Admiral Roger Keyes of the British Royal Navy escorted Albert and Elisabeth to Ostend, liberated by Keyes the day before. 'We are witnessing the agony of the dragon,' Elisabeth exclaimed, 'It is the wish of all the Belgians to fight to the last and never to see a German in Belgium again.'⁵³ Suddenly, Albert and his wife were the greatest enthusiasts for the war in Europe. General Galet was told to leave the Villa Maskens. Fernand Neuray, one of Broqueville's friends, wrote to the former Prime Minister after having met Albert's secretary Ingenbleek: 'Galet has been cast aside and dumped completely. It is as if he does not exist anymore.'⁵⁴ Galet was a liability to the King, because he knew too much about Albert's 'unpatriotic' attitude during the war; but he was a soldier and kept silent. Broqueville was a liability as well. Ingenbleek went to see the Baron to sound him out. Broqueville told Ingenbleek that the King need not worry: he was most loyal to the institution of the monarchy and would never discredit it. Albert rewarded Broqueville by making him a Count. When the Germans asked for an armistice early in November, the King was greatly disappointed. The French President Poincaré, who met him on 9 November, wrote in his diary that Albert was 'saddened by the news of the armistice, which, he says, robs him of his victory.'⁵⁵

After the German surrender on 11 November 1918 and the triumphal return of the King and the Government to Brussels, any willingness to appease moderate Flemings had vanished. The Dutch-language university of Ghent was abolished at once. The royal argument was that 'Belgium cannot grant in a legal way what the occupying Germans had wanted to impose illegally.'⁵⁶ A purge began, as ruthless as the anti-Orangist terror of the 1830s. Every professor who had lectured in Dutch at Ghent was brought to court on the charge of treason. They were all convicted at the so-called 'Trial of the Professors' in 1919 and given long prison sentences. One of them was sentenced to 25 years. Even Ludovic Dosfel, a professor of Law, who, though lecturing in Dutch, had warned his students to keep out of Aktivist politics, was sentenced to 10 years. The students were also punished. One student was sentenced to 8 years in prison because he had recruited other students. Every student who had obtained a

53 Quoted in Weber, p. 107.

54 CSA Broqueville Papers nr. 165, Neuray to Broqueville, 8 Nov. 1918.

55 Quoted in Willequet 4, p. 166.

56 Marie-José, p. 357.

Dutch-language degree at Ghent lost his diploma. They, as well as all others who had enrolled during the war, were prohibited from continuing their studies at any other Belgian university. 'Had to fob off lots of weeping mothers and desperate ex-students these past days,' the new Chancellor of Ghent University (now again a Francophone institution) maliciously wrote in his diary.⁵⁷

Hundreds of Aktivists were arrested by the police. The mob was allowed freely to plunder houses and shops of 'Flamingoths,' while the police looked on. In Ghent, an elderly Aktivist who tried to prevent his house from being plundered was shot; another man was beaten to death, as was his girlfriend. Many hundreds were imprisoned without trial and remained in gaol for weeks. The exact number of those unlawfully imprisoned was never revealed. Wives and daughters of Aktivists, or girls who had befriended German soldiers were publicly humiliated and their hair was shaved off. Some were branded on the forehead with a hot iron.⁵⁸ King Albert did not raise his voice to stop the atrocities. On the contrary, 'for the zealotry of those who in the painful hour that the country was in danger, aimed for its total ruin, no amnesty is imaginable. The culprits have to experience the harshness of severe punishment,' he said in his first public speech after his return to Brussels.⁵⁹

This harshness affected only Flanders. Over 300 Flemish teachers of primary and secondary schools, who had graduated during the war, lost their degrees, while not a single Walloon was disturbed for the same reason. Some 3,240 Flemish civil servants were dismissed for alleged 'Aktivist and Orangist zealotry.'⁶⁰

Thirty-nine people were sentenced to death, including the Protestant vicar Jan Domela-Nieuwenhuis-Nyegaard, and the former editor of *De Vlaamsche Stem*, René De Clercq. They both fled to the Netherlands. Domela-Nieuwenhuis-Nyegaard was the victim of a second political sentence 25 years later, when the Nazis murdered his son and sent the elderly vicar to a concentration camp. One Aktivist 'zealot,' Arthur Faingnaert, accumulated 268 sentences (all for political reasons). He, too, fled to the Netherlands, as did 500 others, including the Jewish Flamingants Lode Oudkerk, Maurice Friedman, Hendrik Van Praag, and S. Samson, whose valuable library was confiscated by the Belgian authorities. The Aktivist Saul De Groot later became the leader of the Communist Party in the Netherlands. The

57 Quoted in Vanacker 1, p. 360.

58 Van De Woestijne, p. 478.

59 Quoted in De Schaepdrijver, p. 293.

60 Deleu, vol. I, p. 90.

anti-Flamingant purge of 1919 led to a brain drain that robbed Flanders of a significant part of its political and intellectual elite.

The most prominent Aktivist arrested by the Belgian authorities was August Borms, the Minister of Defence of the Aktivist government. Borms, a Catholic, had refused to flee. He (somewhat naively) expected a fair hearing in court, but the trial was a sham. It took place in the Brussels *Palais de Justice*, the awe-inspiring Babylonian ziggurat of Leopold II, and was conducted entirely in French. Borms refused to speak French. 'I will teach him to understand French,' the police officer guarding the prisoner yelled at the judges, adding that he hoped they would sentence him to death. Borms did, indeed, receive the death penalty, but he escaped execution because Pope Benedict XV asked the Belgian government for clemency. Of the less prominent Aktivists, fifteen received life imprisonment; 51 were sentenced to fifteen years or more; 52 got between fifteen and ten years; and many hundreds were condemned to sentences of less than ten years. In prison they received harsh treatment. Marten Rudelsheim died in gaol of deprivation. Professor Dörfel became severely ill, was released and died shortly afterwards, barely 44 years old. Jan Hainaut committed suicide in his cell.

The authorities hoped to intimidate the Flemings into submission. Henri Pirenne, the father of Belgicism, rejoiced: 'The last miasmas of Flamingantism have dissolved in the bright sunlight of the French victory!'⁶¹ The intimidation left its mark. When the census of 1920 was held, only 31.7% of the inhabitants of Brussels still dared to declare themselves Dutch-speaking, against 44.7% in 1910. It was dangerous to be a Fleming, as the death of Herman Van den Reeck illustrated. During a parade in Antwerp on 11 July 1920, the 19-year-old student carried the Flemish flag – a black lion on a field of gold. The police tried to confiscate the flag, the young man refused to hand it over and was shot in the stomach. He died the next morning.

The Great Equaliser

The aftermath of the war led to a polarisation between Flemings and Walloons. Already during the war, Father Jules Callewaert, a Flemish Dominican monk who was a parish priest in Stockport near Manchester, concluded: 'Belgium is an unnatural State, which *as such* is a danger for the survival of the Flemish people.'⁶² In August 1917 Charles Maignette, a Liberal MP from Liège and the Grandmaster of the

61 Quoted in Florquin, vol. VIII, p. 286.

62 Quoted in De Schaepe-drijver, p. 195.

Masonic *Grand Orient de Belgique*, warned the King: 'It is intolerable that after the war 4.5 million Flemings decide about the fate of 3 million Walloons. I have heard many people, even civilised and cultivated men, declare that rather than to live under the yoke of the Flemings, rather than allowing a culture and a language which is not theirs imposed on them, they prefer to go where the affinity of their race calls them: to France.'⁶³

For a while, a number of revolutionary Flamings, inspired by Ireland's Easter Rising of 1916, considered the possibility of a Flemish Rising. They concluded, however, that armed rebels would have little chance of success. 'The anti-Flemish terrorism will increase tenfold, hundreds of innocent people will be gaoled, public opinion, under the influence of the clergy, will turn against us.'⁶⁴ In February 1919 two bombs exploded. No one was injured. These were the only terrorist acts ever committed by Flemish-Nationalists. When a message was smuggled to the imprisoned Borms to ask if he agreed with an armed attempt to liberate him from gaol, Borms's reply was negative. When Irish Sinn Féin members offered their assistance to liberate Borms, the Flamings turned the offer down because this would cost lives. 'Of course,' the Irish said, 'how many dead do you need?'⁶⁵

The Belgian regime did not respect the Flamings for their principled non-violence. It did, however, fear and respect the explicit threats of the Walloons to join France, and it pursued a Francophone and Francophile policy to appease them. The King also feared the Socialists. He had promised to bring them to power after the war if they would support the monarchy. He kept his word. Before re-entering Brussels with the victorious army in November 1918, Albert launched a coup d'état.

Albert and Elisabeth left De Panne on 24 October 1918 and settled at Loppem Castle, near Bruges. There, on 11 November, the very day of the armistice, the King received two leading politicians: the Francophone Liberal Paul-Emile Janson and the Flemish Socialist Edward Anseele. They had lived in occupied Belgium during the war, where, following the German collapse, they cleverly filled the political vacuum. The last weeks of the German occupation had been very chaotic: a Soviet of German soldiers took over control in Brussels and hung red flags on official buildings. They invited the Belgian Socialists and Communists to join them. Anseele, who had been a personal

63 RAB FH nr. 242, Magnette to Albert I, shortly before Aug. 1917.

64 Cyriel De Wael to (presumably) Jules Charpentier, in Vanacker 1, p. 353.

65 Vinks, p. 178.

friend of the German revolutionaries Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg for more than a decade, was a sly opportunist. His friends in the German Soviet provided him and Janson with an army vehicle that brought them to the King at Loppem Castle. There, Albert together with his SG subordinate, Prime Minister Cooreman, and his two guests unilaterally changed Belgium's Constitution, in particular its franchise law.

According to the Belgian Constitution, no constitutional changes can be made without a special procedure that requires preliminary elections to appoint a new Parliament with a mandate for changing the Constitution by a two-thirds majority vote. The Loppem four disregarded this and decided there and then to have the next Parliament appointed according to a new electoral procedure, based on proportional representation and one single vote for every Belgian male of 21 and over. Women were deliberately excluded from the franchise because the King feared that they would be more inclined to vote Conservative, while the only aims of the Loppem four were to break the Catholic parliamentary majority and to force coalition governments to include the parties of the Left.

Since the Government and the Parliament would insist on following the constitutional procedure, Albert had to neutralise both institutions. The Government had quite different intentions than those of the four conspirators. In 1917, Broqueville had agreed with the Liberals and Socialists to introduce universal suffrage after the war for every Belgian, including women, aged 25 and over, plus a second vote for every Belgian of 40 and older, again including women. Because this proposal would receive the constitutionally required a two-thirds majority in Parliament, the Loppem four worked out a scheme to remove Parliament and Government for at least one week, leaving the King as the sole legislative and executive power in the country. Two days after the Loppem meeting, Cooreman presented the resignation of his cabinet, to the surprise of the Cabinet itself, where only a few hours earlier the ministers had agreed that they would remain in office until the first post-war plenary session of Parliament the following week. Albert was now the only political authority in the country for a whole week. He used this opportunity to usurp the powers of both Parliament and Government, disregard the Constitution and proclaim the new franchise law devised in Loppem.

On 22 November 1918, Parliament convened in Brussels for its first session since 4 August 1914. The King gave the opening speech, entirely in French, announcing the decisions that had been taken in Loppem. The inhabitants of Brussels looked upon Albert as the great-

est of all war heroes, who had single-handedly driven the enemy from Belgium after doing battle with them in the trenches for four years. This was not the right moment for any politician to criticise the King. Hence, the blatant illegality of the Loppem decisions was left unmentioned. As Beernaert had said about the previous violation of the Constitution in 1909, it was better to 'smile and forget the whole affair.'

Albert appointed a new government that included as many members of the Liberal-Socialist alliance as of the Catholic parliamentary majority. Of the twelve ministers, only three lived in Flanders, and none had Flammingant sympathies. On the contrary, the King had removed three war-time ministers because he considered them too Flemish-minded. Vandervelde became Minister of Justice, Anseele got Public Works and a third Socialist, Joseph Wauters, the Department of Labour.

On 16 November 1919, the first post-war elections in Belgium were held according to the Loppem franchise system. As these elections were unconstitutional, they were strictly speaking invalid. But no one dared say so with the post-war purges still raging. After the elections, in which the Catholics lost their absolute majority, the King installed a new coalition of Catholics, Socialists and Liberals. It established the framework of Belgium as it still exists today and as it had been devised by Albert and his late friend, the engineer Emile Waxweiler, when they were brainstorming before the war about a social welfare construction that could unite the Belgians. It is a unique system, where the Government runs the State together with so-called 'Social Partners.' These 'Social Partners' are the *Fédération des entreprises de Belgique*, the official representative of the Belgian employers, and three trade unions (a Christian-Democrat, a Socialist and a Liberal one) recognised as the *only* official representatives of the employees. Economic and social policies are decided in consensus between the Social Partners, rather than in Parliament. The management of the entire welfare system has been delegated to the 'Partners.'

Indeed, in Belgium the three official unions, not the state, pay unemployment benefit. Each year the government gives them the necessary funds and also pays them a fee for every unemployed person they cater for. The perverse result is that it is in the unions' interest to have high unemployment: the more people without a job, the richer and more powerful the unions become.⁶⁶ All Belgian civil servants are *automatically* union members: the government pays their membership

66 In 2001, the unions received 4.78 billion francs (about £72.4 million or \$119.5 million) from the government to pay unemployment benefit.

dues directly to the unions – even if an individual does not want to join. In that case his dues are divided proportionally amongst the three official unions.⁶⁷ The authorities deal only with the three officially recognised unions; all other unions are called ‘independent unions.’ The latter are small and powerless. Employers who negotiate with them run into serious trouble with the three big ones.⁶⁸

The mandatory health insurance system is also run by the Social Partners. Each of the official unions is linked to a sickness fund. These funds are represented in the state organisations supervising the health care system. They own hospitals, pharmacies and health resorts. The three big conglomerates also have their own insurance companies, their own savings and investment banks, and their own Members of Parliament. The Social Partners finance the party of their political affiliation and appoint their representatives in the party structures, at national as well as local level. Because at least two of the three so-called ‘traditional’ parties are needed to form a government coalition, the Social Partners are always represented in the Cabinet. Consequently, it is impossible for any government even to try to diminish the influence of the Social Partners.

The post-war governments also created the legal framework to allow the state to interfere directly in the economy. In 1923, rail transport and telegraph services became government monopolies, and the national airline company Sabena was established. All this happened in close cooperation with the Social Partners, who came to share directly in the power of the state. They secured (well-paid) representations on the boards of all government-run companies and institutions, such as the National Rail Company, the Belgian postal services, Sabena, the Belgian Central Bank, the broadcasting company, the University of Ghent, etc.

As the official unions, their sickness funds, banks and insurance companies operate in Flanders as well as Wallonia, and have huge financial and political interests in both parts of the country, they are – like the monarchy – by nature Belgicist institutions. The Social Partners do not tolerate any questioning of the Belgian State and its unity, because of the real risk that any successor to this state will be less generous to them. They are always prepared to mobilise their

67 In 2001, the government paid the unions 2,815 francs (about £42 or \$70) per civil servant, or a total of over 1.82 billion francs (£27.6 million or \$45.5 million).

68 In 2001, the three official unions had a combined membership of over 2.9 million – almost 30 per cent of the whole Belgian population. Over half the members (53.8%) belonged to the Christian-Democrat Union, 39% to the Socialist Union, and 7.2% to the Liberal Union.

members and their clients (the unemployed, the sick, everyone at the receiving end of the generous ‘social’ subsidies provided by the state, as well as those who earn their living providing the welfare state’s ‘care’) against ‘political adventures,’ such as Flemish separatism. By gradually handing over the Belgian State to a limited number of unions whose vested interests spanned the linguistic divide, Albert mobilised the Social Partners against the Flamings and their goal of an independent Flanders.

This ‘unionisation’ of the state — this process of handing over state authority to the three official trade unions and their subsidiaries, while at the same time strengthening the Belgian national union — was not yet fully completed when Albert died. In fact, it was only completed in the 1950s, the early years of the reign of his grandson Baudouin. But the Loppem Coup marked the start of the process that gradually transformed Belgium into a corporatist state, where the Flemings and the Walloons are bound together within one single welfare system spanning the linguistic divide. It had an immediate effect: in 1919 the membership of the Socialist Trade Union exploded from 120,000 to 720,000. This was ample proof of the efficiency of Albert’s scheme, which made social-corporatism the main pillar upholding Belgium.

* * *

The Belgian electorate remained remarkably stable during the 1920s and ‘30s. In the 1919 elections the Catholic Party won 73 seats in the Chamber of Representatives, the Socialists 70 seats, the Liberals 34 seats, and the *Front Partij*, a new party, established by Flemish war veterans, five seats. The *Frontists* were the radicals amongst the Flamings. Moderates, like Frans Van Cauwelaert, believed that it was better to work within the three traditional parties. Many Flamings joined the Catholic Party. In Parliament Van Cauwelaert could count on some 40 MPs. In Flanders, 51.7% of the electorate had voted for the Catholic Party; 25.3% for the Socialists; 14.1% for the Liberals; 5.2% for the Frontists.

Apart from the Catholic losses to the Flemish-Nationalists, the preferences of the Flemish electorate hardly changed during the next two decades. In 1939, the Catholics gained 41% of the Flemish electorate; the Socialists 26%; the Liberals 12.6%; the *Vlaams-Nationaal Blok* (formerly *Frontists*) 15%. This gridlock of the electorate was visible among the Belgian Francophones as well: between 1919 and 1939, the Socialists received the support of about half the electorate in

Wallonia. While the Catholics in Flanders saw a number of their voters defect to the Flemish-Nationalists, the Communists and the Fascists were only able to break through amongst the Francophones. On the eve of the Second World War, this resulted in 17 seats in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives for the Flemish-Nationalists and 13 seats for the totalitarian parties of the extreme Left and the extreme Right. The latter 13 seats were exclusively Francophone. In Flanders, neither Communism nor Fascism made an electoral breakthrough.

In Albert's 'unionised' state, where the real powers were vested in the Social Partners instead of in Parliament, it did not matter which of the three 'traditional' parties a citizen voted for. They all defended the status quo of the corporatist system. The only votes that made a difference were votes against the system. In Flanders, this meant voting for Flemish secession; in Francophone Belgium, it meant voting for a revolution of either the extreme Left or the extreme Right.

The inter-war years witnessed a rapid succession of twenty government cabinets, one of which lasted only one day, another only six days. There were eleven so-called 'national' coalitions of Catholics, Socialists and Liberals; six coalitions of Catholics and Liberals; two of Catholics and Socialists; and one Catholic minority government (lasting nine days). The introduction of the corporatist system led to the *end of politics*: it is, indeed, hard to tell where the twenty inter-war cabinets differed. When they fell, it was usually over personal intrigues within the government, rather than basic disagreements about political options. There were ten government crises in the fourteen years between the 1919 elections and Albert's death. This gave the King frequent opportunities to interfere directly in politics. In Belgium, even today, the King plays the decisive role in forming governments. Without having to account to anyone, he unilaterally appoints the so-called *formateur* who brings the parties together for coalition talks. Belgium is the only monarchy where after the First World War the King's powers increased. Albert, however, longed for the period between 1914 and 1918 when his political power had been almost absolute. 'Let's admit it: it was far more interesting during the war. It takes a political crisis for me to have anything to do,' he told Vandervelde.⁶⁹ To his sister Henriette he complained: 'The profession of a constitutional monarch is a very bad farce. I would take any opportunity to leave this prisoner's role.'⁷⁰ It is no surprise that he greatly admired Benito Mussolini, a fellow authoritarian as well as a corporatist.

69 Quoted in Vandervelde 2, p. 218.

70 RAM WC, Albert I to Henriette, 28 Oct. 1924.

Another constructivist scheme was devised for the Congo. This scheme, too, had been masterminded by Albert's friend Waxweiler. He saw colonisation as a utilitarian enterprise. The natives were the valuable manpower needed by the mining industry in the Katanga and Kasai provinces. Leopold II had murdered half the colony's indigenous population, but, under Albert's rule, population management became a priority.

In 1906, Leopold II had brought the Congo economy under direct control of a number of SG companies, such as the *Union Minière* (UM), its mining subsidiary. As manpower was especially needed in scarcely populated mining areas of the Katanga and the Kasai, the UM imported labourers from other parts of the Congo to supply the workforce for the mines. The labourers were selected by physicians according to strict medical criteria, because 'recruiting weak elements is not only a cruelty, but a useless cruelty and economic nonsense.'⁷¹ They had to live in labour camps of a quasi-military nature. They were well-fed, well-housed, well-cared-for, but closely controlled. Various types of camps were drawn by Waxweiler's *Institut de Sociologie* and different methods of disciplining the Congolese were studied, in order to give optimal long-term labour results. Waxweiler even conducted research into the ideal diet to guarantee the highest labour productivity at the lowest cost.

In the early 1920s, the Belgian social scientists concluded that all labourers had to marry. 'Married men have a better morale and a higher morality than single men. As a consequence, their ratios for sickness, mortality, desertion and absenteeism are lower and their productivity is much higher,' Waxweiler's pupil, Dr. Leopold Mottoulle, the head of the UM's social policy division and a leading member of the *Institut Royal Colonial Belge*, wrote. The UM went very far in its policy. It forced all its non-married Black employees to marry. The company selected the brides. The UM actually bought young women, paying the traditional African dowries to their families. The women were recruited according to medical criteria which envisaged the 'production' of future labourers of quality standard.

Whenever an already married Black man applied for a job at the UM, his wife had to pass medical tests as well. If she was considered physically 'insufficient,' her husband did not get a job. The marriages were duly registered in order to allow the company to control the breeding process. Keeping a concubine was forbidden for the Black employees, as was polygamy and adultery. The labour camps were

71 Mouchet and Pearson, p. 5.

transformed into so-called '*villages indigènes*,' where the labourers had to live with their families. This allowed the workforce to supply the company with children that could be moulded from the cradle into workers of optimum quality.

The so-called 'indigenous villages' soon developed into huge townships where the inhabitants were pampered, but where at the same time they were guinea pigs for the Belgian social engineers. It was a closely controlled totalitarian society. 'If one could say that the *Union Minière* was a state within the colonial state, then it was in any case a social and altruistic state,' a 1992 book about the system states.⁷² In some aspects the UM villages did, indeed, resemble the ideals of the 'social and altruistic' welfare state. Every family had its own house with a garden. The houses were semi-detached and built along avenues and streets lined with trees. The Blacks were fed by the company with a protein-rich diet and much attention was paid to hygiene. Health care was free, as was the education of the children, who had to be sent to kindergarten and to primary school, where they learned basic skills, including French. Parents who did not send their children to school were punished by lowering the food ration of the mothers (not the fathers, because they had to labour in the mines). Education beyond primary school was not deemed necessary. The aim of the school was to discipline the boys into 'becoming good labourers' and to teach the girls how to be good mothers.⁷³

Female behaviour especially was closely monitored in the 'indigenous villages'. Women were perceived to be potentially more subversive elements in society than men. The women were not allowed to leave the camp. If they wanted to visit their own families, they needed a permit. Breastfeeding the children was discouraged, because the UM wanted to boost feminine fertility in order to create as large a pool of future labourers as possible. To enforce this policy, mothers had to bring their children to kindergarten from the age of one to be fed by the company. If a woman insisted on breastfeeding her child, her food ration was lowered.

The culmination of the Belgian social engineering project in the Congo was the creation of a new people: the Tshanga-Tshanga. Dr. Mottoulle considered it a good idea to diminish the ethnic tensions between the various tribes and peoples of the Congo by substituting them with a new race, wiping out all previously existing differences. Inter-ethnic marriages were enforced in order to artificially construct

72 Lekime, p. 94.

73 Mottoulle, p. 33.

this Tshanga-Tshanga people. Its name was devised by the Congolese themselves, Tshanga-Tshanga meaning 'The Great Equaliser.' In 1937, the Belgian Prof. J. L. Frateur wrote a study about this racial project for the *Institut Royal Colonial Belge*, entitled: 'The Notion of Race in the Light of the Results of Experimental Heredity.' The Belgians tried to discover what ethnic mixture would make the Tshanga-Tshanga people economically most profitable for the mining industry. As Dr. Van Nitsen, one of the leading racial constructivists in the Congo, wrote in 1932: 'Our aim is not to make an elite, but simply to create a strong, healthy, disciplined workforce of devoted labourers.'

Nevertheless, the project was a failure, despite the fact that, as Bruno De Meulder of Leuven University concluded in 1996, it was 'undoubtedly one of the most consistently applied attempts at social engineering ever.'⁷⁴ Indeed, the 'devoted labourers' frequently rebelled and often went on strike. Charles de T'Serclaes, the SG representative in Leopoldville, opined that 'a certain moral and even physical coercion' was necessary, 'because laziness is the cause of the moral decline and the physical deterioration of the race.'⁷⁵ As in the old days of Leopoldian tyranny, the *chicotte* was frequently used to whip the Blacks into submission. In 1941, after incidents at Likasi, Mottouille wrote that he was sick and tired of the attitude of the ungrateful Tshanga-Tshanga. He regretted that the army had not opened fire and 'killed two or three hundred' to set an example.⁷⁶

* * *

Belgium did not feel properly rewarded after the First World War. At the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, it demanded the annexation of the Grand-Duchy of Luxemburg and a dismemberment of the Netherlands. Though the Dutch had not committed any aggression on Belgium and had not even been involved in the war, Brussels claimed large parts of the Netherlands. 'The Belgians are on the make and they want to grab whatever they can,' Lord Hardinge warned the Dutch Ambassador in London.⁷⁷

The Belgian demands became so vociferous that in the summer of 1919 the Dutch army planned a pre-emptive military strike on Antwerp and Brussels. U.S. President Wilson, however, assured The Hague that the United States would guarantee the Dutch borders.

74 De Meulder, p. 122.

75 T'Serclaes to Gaston Périer, 30 Oct. 1933, in Brion and Moreau, p. 305.

76 Quoted in Vellut, p. 157.

77 Ambassador E. Marees van Swinderen to Herman Van Karnebeek, the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, 18 Dec. 1918, in Provoost, vol. I, p. 46.

Ultimately, Brussels only obtained Rwanda and Burundi (two tiny German colonies in central Africa), a monetary union with Luxemburg (despite the fact that the Luxemburgians voted against it by referendum), plus a number of German-speaking municipalities bordering on Belgium's eastern border. Germany was also forced to pay Belgium a large financial indemnity of 2.5 billion gold marks.

The Treaty of Versailles also abolished the neutral status that the Treaty of London had imposed on Belgium in 1831. Brussels received the right to join international alliances, and at once signed a military pact with France. Because the impoverished Germans were incapable of paying the full war indemnities immediately, Belgium and France invaded the Rhineland and occupied Frankfurt and Darmstadt in April 1920. Paris hoped to trigger a secession of the German Rhine provinces and the establishment of an independent Rhine Republic. Britain condemned the Franco-Belgian aggression. In June, Brussels asked the Belgian ambassador in London, Ludovic Moncheur, to organise a media campaign to pressure the British government into joining the Rhineland occupation. Despite his expertise in such matters, Moncheur, who as ambassador to the U.S. in the early 1900s had been involved in bribing American politicians and journalists on behalf of Leopold II, was unable to influence the British cabinet.

King Albert concluded that a Belgian press agency had to be created to provide the Belgian papers with international news not filtered through Reuters in London. The King personally approached Belgian industrialists to sponsor such a venture. This resulted in the establishment of the *Agence Belga*, which, as Max-Léo Gérard, Albert's private secretary, wrote, 'is an indispensable instrument for our foreign policy.' The King was also in favour of a major reinforcement of the Belgian army. This, however, antagonised the Marxist wing of the socialist BWP. Hence, after the November 1921 elections, Albert installed a coalition of Catholics and Liberals, led by Georges Theunis, a Franchophone Catholic, who had previously been on the payroll of the SG.

Angered by the fact that the Rhinelanders did not secede and that Germany was still unable to deliver its war indemnities, an army of 32,000 French and 25,000 Belgians crossed the Rhine on 11 January 1923 and occupied the Ruhr region as well. One week earlier, during a summit meeting in Paris, the British had warned the French and the Belgians in vain not to squeeze the Germans dry. The Ruhr province was Germany's industrial powerhouse; its coal mines and steel works were a direct competitor to the coal and steel industry of the SG in Wallonia. Because the Germans could not pay up, the French and the Belgians

intended to destroy the German economy to the benefit of their own industries. The Franco-Belgian army used brutal force to break up protest demonstrations of German civilians, killing 132 unarmed men and women. When the protests continued, Belgium persuaded France in April to introduce an even harsher occupational regime. All factories that were of no use to the Belgians and the French were shut down, coal mines were flooded, electric plants were closed, and the import of all commodities except basic food products was prohibited.

The occupation of the Ruhr brought on the economic collapse of Germany and led to hyperinflation. The value of the German mark plummeted, from 7,525 marks for one U.S. dollar on 3 January to over 4,210 billion marks by 21 November. This ruined the entire German middle class, as the British correctly perceived. Lord Robert Cecil later commented that ‘the Ruhr occupation was probably one of the stupidest things that a government has ever done.’ The French historian Maurice Baumont has called the Ruhr occupation ‘the beginning of the birth of Nazism.’ According to R.J. Schmidt, it was the ‘seedbed of World War II.’⁷⁸

As Flanders benefited from a strong German economy, because the Ruhr was the hinterland of the port of Antwerp, the Franco-Belgian military operations against Germany led to rising tensions between Flemings and Walloons. Because the issue was considered to be disruptive to the cohesion of the artificial Belgian State, the Belgian establishment did not want the Ruhr occupation to be mentioned in public debate. Belgium’s three ‘traditional’ political parties even forbade their representatives to discuss the matter in Parliament. When the Catholic Flemish Senator Van Overbergh asked Prime Minister Theunis a question related to the Ruhr occupation, his colleague and party member Wittemans shouted him down: ‘The agreement is to keep quiet about this. One should not talk about it.’ Only the MPs of the *Front Partij* mentioned the topic, but the government refused to answer the questions of these ‘*Flamingo*ths.’

Albert intervened frequently to prevent the Theunis cabinet from falling. The result was that it lasted a record three and a half years, making it the longest-serving government in Belgium between 1918 and 1954. With the Socialists in opposition, there was, however, one danger. ‘There is one thing which we cannot fear enough,’ the King told Theunis in June 1922: ‘a coalition between the Socialists and the Flemings.’⁷⁹ Hence, as soon as the army had been reinforced, in the

78 Cecil, pp. 142–3; Baumont, vol I, p. 279; Schmidt, *passim*.

79 Quoted in Willequet 4, p. 188.

spring of 1925, Albert installed a cabinet of Catholics and Socialists. But the spectre of Flamingantism began to haunt Laken. The *Front Partij* launched a campaign to renew the neutral international status of Belgium. This drew much popular support in Flanders. In protest against the Franco-Belgian treaty, a number of Flemish conscripts refused to serve. They were condemned to long prison sentences. Some of the prisoners went on hunger strike. One of them died, three others became permanent invalids.

From the early 1920s onwards, Fascist Belgicist groups like the *Légion Nationale* and the *Action National* of Baron Pierre Nothomb, a grandson of one of the leading 1830 revolutionaries, waged vicious anti-Flemish and anti-Semite campaigns. They regarded both the Flamingants and the Jews as unpatriotic elements. They wanted Flemish activists to be disenfranchised and all Jews to be deported from Belgium. The vilest anti-Semites were two Antwerp Belgicists, Charles Somville and René Lambrichts. The Flemish-Nationalists on the other hand welcomed Jewish organisations in the Antwerp headquarters of the *Front Partij*. On 13 November 1922 *De Schelde*, the party's newspaper, was probably the first paper outside Germany to run an editorial warning against the anti-Semitism of an obscure German politician, one Adolf Hitler, whom two years later it called a 'persecutor of the Jews.'⁸⁰

As the Flamingant Movement was growing stronger all the time, Albert asked the Catholic Church, the only authority the Flemings seemed to recognise, formally to condemn Flemish-Nationalism. As early as 1920, the King had asked the Papal Nuncio in Brussels, Mgr. Nicotra, for the direct intervention of Pope Benedict XV. Albert also sent Cardinal Mercier, the Belgicist Archbishop of Mechelen, to Rome to ask the Holy Father to prohibit the faithful from 'engaging in passionate conflicts that divide citizens from the same country.' Benedict adopted a cautious position. He wrote a letter about the '*Quaestio Flandrica*' in February 1921, exhorting only priests and seminarians, but no lay people, to abstain from political activities.

In 1926, the King asked for a new intervention from the Vatican. Albert personally wrote to the new Pope Pius XI. 'The Flamingant clergy has disobeyed the previous papal letter,' he complained. 'Its extremist propaganda, especially its separatist intentions, threaten the social order and the unity of the country.'⁸¹ Baron Beyens, the Belgian Ambassador to the Vatican, was even more explicit in a let-

80 *De Schelde*, 13 Nov. 1922, 30 Jan. and 2 Mar. 1924.

81 Stengers 9, pp. 205-6.

ter to Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, the Vatican Secretary of State: 'The Flamingant leadership wants a total autonomy for the Flemish part of the country. They call it an administrative separation, but they actually aim for complete independence, a disruption of national unity. I regret that I have to add that the most fervent and blinded propagandists of an independent Republic of Flanders belong to the lower clergy and to the religious orders. These clerics remain deaf to the admonitions of the Holy Father and oppose the authority of the Bishop of Mechelen.'⁸² Pius XI reacted favourably. Though he did not excommunicate the Flamingants, he complied with the Belgian request to change the traditional formula in Holy Mass that stated that Mass was said 'in communion with the Pope of Rome and the local Bishop.' In Belgium, it was replaced by the formula that Mass was said 'in communion with the Pope, with the local Bishop and with King Albert.'

On 9 December 1928, the *Front Partij* gained a victory that rocked the Belgian establishment. The party had put August Borms, the former Aktivist leader, forward as its candidate for the parliamentary by-elections in Antwerp. Borms was still in gaol serving his life sentence, but obtained 83,058 votes or 65.2% of the electorate. The authorities, arguing that a prisoner could not take up his seat in Parliament, proclaimed Borms's election invalid and appointed the losing candidate, the Liberal Belgicist Paul Baelde, MP for Antwerp. In order to appease the indignant people, Borms was released from prison on 17 January 1929.

The so-called 'Borms election' persuaded the Belgian Bishops to interfere directly in the electoral process. In 1929, Thomas Debacker, a war veteran and a popular schoolteacher from the rural Kempen area to the east of Antwerp, founded a new Flamingant party, the *Katholieke Vlaamse Volkspartij*. Cardinal Joseph-Ernest Van Roey, who had succeeded Mercier as Primate of Belgium after the latter's death in 1926, had a letter read from the pulpit in Debacker's constituency during Sunday Mass. He forbade all Catholics to vote for Debacker. This did not prevent Debacker from winning a seat in the Chamber of Representatives. In June 1930, Van Roey published a pastoral letter declaring that loyalty to the Belgian State was a Catholic duty. 'As shepherds of your souls we declare and teach that for all, Flemings and Walloons, Belgium is the fatherland,' the Cardinal's letter said. It was read from the pulpit in every church.

In 1932, the Flamings won the municipal elections. In Debacker's home town of Mol, they became the largest party. Mol was also the town of Count Broqueville, who had meanwhile returned as Prime Minister. Though Debacker had the support of 9 of the 15 members of the municipal council, the King refused to appoint him as Mayor and appointed a politician from Broqueville's official Catholic Party (4 seats) instead. Though this was undemocratic, it was not illegal, because according to Belgian law the King appoints the mayors. Unlike Albert, Debacker was a democrat. In the party journal, he warned against Hitler's 'totalitarian civilisation from which Flanders can expect no good,'⁸³ but he also made it clear that he would never volunteer to fight for Belgium again, as he had done in 1914.

In the late 1920s, the anti-militarist campaigns of the Flamings attracted the attention of the German-Swiss physicist Albert Einstein, a self-declared pacifist, as well as a would-be social engineer. Unfortunately, the latter prevailed over the former in his priorities. Einstein believed in World Revolution and admired the Soviet Union, 'the first country that through its powerful action has proved the practical possibility of a planned economy.'⁸⁴ When Einstein visited Brussels in 1927, Albert, who cared greatly about his international reputation, invited him over to Laken. Einstein at once felt at home with the Belgian monarch and his schemes of social engineering. He also became a close friend of the Queen, whose Soviet-friendly opinions originated in talks with Einstein. Until the early 1920s, Elisabeth had been outspokenly anti-Soviet as well as anti-Semite. In November 1919, during a visit to the United States, the Belgian royal couple had amazed Assistant Secretary of State, Breckinridge Long, with remarks about 'the part played by the Jews in Bolshevism, their designs for control of the world.' Especially the Queen, the American noted in his diary, 'spoke several times of Jewish ambitions and connected the Zionist movement with it. She asked of Justice Louis D. Brandeis, of the propriety of his connection with Zionism.'⁸⁵ Albert, too, believed in dark Jewish conspiracies. 'The Jews love the freemasons and hope for their triumph,' he noted in his war diary in 1916.⁸⁶

83 Debacker in *De Nieuwe Kempen*, 5 May 1934.

84 Quoted in Erauw, p. 176.

85 Third Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long, Diary, 10 Nov. 1919, p. 314 (3), in Library of Congress, Washington D.C., Division of Manuscripts.

86 RAB KAD, 17 Mar. 1916.

In the 1930s, Einstein, although a Jew, became a political advisor of the King. Albert asked him how to deal with the Flamingant conscripts refusing to serve in the Belgian army. Einstein replied: 'It seems to me that the Belgian army is an instrument of defence and not at all an instrument of aggression. Hence, it is indispensable for the security of Belgium.' He advised, however, not to imprison those who refused to fulfil their service, but to 'have them work in the mines, or nurse contagious people.'⁸⁷ The two Alberts, Einstein and the King, also shared a mutual distrust of the U.S. They suspected America of harbouring dangerous imperialist dreams. Already in March 1917, in a conversation with Colonel Génie, King Albert had proposed a Franco-Belgian alliance as a device 'to resist America which is about to join the war, not to suffer with us, but to conquer us.' Einstein, as one learns from his letters to Laken, shared this distrust of the Americans, whom he called 'minuscule demi-Gods' with 'childish illusions,' who impose 'a new sort of colonialism through the money they invest in foreign countries. And those who defend themselves against this, are an enemy.'⁸⁸

Blood on the Rocks

There are many indications that Albert and Elisabeth grew apart in the 1920s. The King became the father to at least one bastard son. The Queen also had a sex life of her own. During a vacation in Italy in 1922, the 16-year-old Marie-José witnessed her mother flirting with King Victor-Emmanuel III of Italy, who 'could not keep his eyes from my mother.' Victor-Emmanuel followed Elisabeth around whenever she went swimming and sunbathing. They locked themselves up for hours in a little cabin on the beach. Marie-José also noticed that he had stolen a kiss from her mother in an elevator. The Belgian Queen's habit of lavishly powdering her face betrayed him: 'When he left the elevator, he had some of her powder on his nose.'⁸⁹ Apparently, King Albert did not mind. After a period of marital tension in late 1918 and early 1919, Albert and Elisabeth had reached a *modus vivendi*, allowing each other their own erotic adventures.

The relationship between Albert and his two legitimate sons was strained. Crown Prince Leopold, the Duke of Brabant, was a tall and handsome Adonis, with blue eyes and blond curly hair. He had

87 Einstein to Albert I, 14 July 1933, in Marie-José, pp. 401–2.

88 Einstein to Elisabeth, 20 Nov. 1933, 12 Jan. 1953 and 22 Jan. 1955, in Marie-José, p. 396.

89 Quoted in Petacco, pp. 50–1.

inherited the Saxe-Coburg looks of his great-grandfather Leopold I, and none of the ugliness of his mother's Wittelbach family. This had apparently all gone to his brother Charles, the spitting image of his mother, with the same long, bony face. Leopold craved his father's approval. Once, when he was 23 years old, an angry Albert scolded his son. 'I left feeling very miserable,' Leopold recalled many years later. 'I went to a public park and, feeling so upset by the row with my father, I spent the night there... on a bench.' Charles, the Count of Flanders, was more phlegmatic than his timid older brother. When Albert reprimanded Charles for his bad school results, Charles replied: 'The second worst student of the class is such a genius that it is impossible for me to surpass him.'

Albert appointed Jacques Pirenne, the son of the Belgianist historian Henri Pirenne, teacher and advisor to the Crown Prince. Jacques Pirenne was one of the leaders of the anti-Semite *Jeunesses Nationales*. He exerted a great influence over Leopold by constantly flattering him. The Papal Nuncio in Brussels, Mgr. Clemente Micara, noted in 1933 that the Crown Prince was 'impressionable to the highest degree.'

In 1920, Albert and Elisabeth attended the wedding of 'Cimmie' (Cynthia) Curzon to a promising young British MP, Sir Oswald Mosley. With Cimmie's aid – and the fortune of her American Jewish grandfather – Mosley later founded the British Fascist Party. Her sister, 'Ba-Ba' (Alexandra) Curzon, became an ardent Fascist, too, as well as one of Mosley's mistresses (which earned her the nickname *Ba-Ba-Blackshirt*). King Albert probably regretted that all three Curzon daughters, heirs to Levi Leiter's immense fortune, married Englishmen. They would have been a good match for Charles. Albert preferred the aristocracy of money above that of blood. 'Personally I would prefer my son, or my sons, to become the sons-in-law of John Rockefeller,' he wrote. 'There lies the future: the only kings left are the kings of money, and only they establish new dynasties.'

Crown Prince Leopold, however, had to marry for the sake of politics, rather than money. On 10 November 1926, the Duke of Brabant married the Swedish princess Astrid. As with Albert's marriage 26 years before, the constitutionally-required approval by the Government was not asked. The 21-year-old Astrid was a daughter of Carl Bernadotte, a younger brother of King Gustav V of Sweden. She was tall and friendly, with green eyes and dark brown hair, and looked more like a blushing farmer's daughter from the South of France, than a Northern princess. The House of Bernadotte was founded by one of Napoleon's generals, a Gascon of humble origins, who in 1810 had

been adopted by the King of Sweden. Astrid's mother was Princess Ingeborg of Denmark, whose grandmother was a Princess of Orange. Thus, King Willem I of the United Netherlands, who in 1831 had lost the Belgian provinces to Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, was one of Astrid's ancestors. Her elder sister Martha was the wife of Crown Prince Olav of Norway. The marriage of Leopold to Astrid linked Belgium to Sweden, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands – four neutral Northern countries.

Indeed, the Belgo-Swedish marriage signified the beginning of a shift in Albert's foreign policies, away from the Franco-Belgian alliance, and towards a renewal of Belgium's neutralist position. By the mid-1920s, King Albert had begun to doubt the wisdom of the Franco-Belgian military alliance because it obliged Belgium to join France in every European war in which Paris got involved. In 1925, Belgium and France pulled their troops out of the Rhine and the Ruhr provinces after Germany formally recognised its new western borders. The German eastern border, however, remained under dispute. Paris had signed treaties with Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania to guarantee them French military assistance in case of an armed conflict with Berlin. Unlike the French government, Albert was not prepared to jeopardise his army for countries he felt he had nothing to do with. As the 1920s drew to their close, the King began to fear a new European war, which made it even more urgent for him to detach Belgium from France. 'France has concluded alliances that will engage it in foreign wars. We have to ensure that Belgium is not drawn into any conflict foreign to our interests,' the King told Hymans, his Minister of Foreign Affairs.⁹⁰ 'Of this we may be certain,' Lord Tyrrell of the British Foreign Office wrote. 'Unless the knife is at her throat, Belgium will not fight except in her own defence: never say for Poland or Roumania.'⁹¹

In 1926, Albert reappointed Emile Galet, whom he had so abruptly discarded in September 1918, as Chief of Staff of the Belgian army. In December 1930, when Hitler was not yet in power in Germany, Albert told Galet's pupil, General Raoul Van Overstraeten: 'The fight for the hegemony within Europe is not at all finished. It will lead to new wars between England and Germany.'⁹² Both the marriage of his son to Astrid of Sweden and that of his daughter Marie-José to Crown Prince Umberto of Italy in 1930 must be seen in the context of a gradual shift

90 Hymans, vol. II, p. 602.

91 FO 371/10.531 W11181/9992/4, annotation Tyrrell, 25 Dec. 1924.

92 Van Overstraeten 1, p. 78.

in Belgium's international policy from pro-French to once again neutralist. The day after Marie-José's marriage in Rome, King Albert attended a party parade of the Fascist Militia, something he was not obliged to do, but did out of sympathy for Mussolini.

Leopold's marriage also fulfilled its dynastic purposes. According to Colonel Van den Heuvel, Leopold's aide-de-camp, the car of the Duke and Duchess of Brabant often stopped during their trips through the countryside. The driver had to go for a walk while the Prince and his wife disappeared into the fields. On 11 October 1927, Astrid gave birth to her first baby, Joséphine-Charlotte. On 7 September 1930, Astrid's first son was born: Baudouin, the Count of Hainaut. On 6 June 1934, the Duchess of Brabant gave birth to a second son, Albert. The baby received the title of Prince of Liège.

Meanwhile the King's financial worries increased. The finances of the Belgian royal family, like those of many others, were severely hit in the late 1920s. We do not know the details of the losses, but Albert complained to his sister Henriette: 'Everyone has lost money, including me. I am in a situation that is far from brilliant.' Only occasionally the public could catch a glimpse of the King's private financial situation. One such occasion occurred in February 1932 when the Communist politician Henri Glineur revealed that Albert owned a stake of 9.3 million francs in the Walloon coal mine of Marchienne-au-Pont. Glineur was angry after a mining accident there which occurred through negligence on the part of the management and which had killed sixteen miners and seriously injured eleven. The King paid a visit to the injured, prompting the Communist to write that Albert was a 'sadist' coming to view 'the cooked flesh of the good miners that had died for the glory of the personal profits and the good reputation of the House of Albert and Co.' As a result of the article, Glineur was brought to court. He was condemned to one year's imprisonment for insulting the King. The verdict was hardly noticed. Apart from *Le Peuple*, none of the major newspapers devoted any attention to it.

Albert also had a major stake in the biggest Belgian steelworks, the Cockerill Company in Seraing near Liège, and the royal family was the largest shareholder of the SG. This holding controlled over 40% of the Belgian economy. In 1932, a Dutch economist calculated that it owned 10% of the Belgian cotton industry, 25 to 30% of its coal mines, 48% of its iron and steel works, 60 to 75% of its zinc industry and 100% of its copper industry. The SG also owned Belgium's largest bank, the *Banque Générale* or G-Bank. In the late 1920s, Albert had Emile Franquai, the Governor of the SG, appointed a cabinet member to watch over the interests of the holding.

The fruits of socialism and corporatism were bitter: they had brought economic sclerosis to the huge coal and steel works of Wallonia, where economic growth had stagnated. The number of Walloon industrial jobs remained static at 400,000 between 1896 and 1937. In Flanders, with its many small and medium-sized private enterprises, the economy boomed and industrial jobs grew in the same period from 184,000 to 400,000. Proportionally, the Walloon share in Belgium's industrial production fell from 55.9% (1896) over 49.9% (1910) to 40.0% (1937), while in Flanders it rose from 27.4% over 33.3% to 40.1%. Most of Brussels' 200,000 industrial jobs were filled by Flemings as well: they worked harder than the Francophones, were less demanding, and tended to distrust the trade unions – those pillars of the Belgian regime. Flanders also remained the dominant agricultural area in Belgium, with over 370,000 farmers in 1939, against less than 300,000 in Wallonia.

The growing political, demographic and economic power of Flanders left the Belgian regime no other option but to grant the Flemings more linguistic rights. In 1930, exactly one hundred years after the Belgian revolutionaries had banned Dutch, the State University of Ghent became a Dutch-language institution. Half the cabinet ministers were Flemings by now, some of them were even moderate Flamings who no longer accepted the argument that Dutch was unfit as a language for higher education. The establishment of a Dutch university came as a blow to Belgicists such as Henri Pirenne, who resigned as a professor at Ghent in protest. His son, Jacques, started a campaign to keep Ghent University at least partly French. The King, too, wanted Ghent to become a bilingual university, as did the Church. They were, however, unable to persuade the politicians. The Catholic Party, fearing that it would lose too many votes to the Flemish-Nationalists, insisted on an entirely Dutch university. Once Ghent had become a Dutch-language institution, the Catholic University of Leuven was forced to follow suit, lest it lose all its Flemish students to Ghent. At Leuven, however, the Church succeeded in slowing down the inevitable development. Leuven became a bilingual university and remained half Francophone until as late as 1968.

Soon, new concessions had to be made to the Flemings: In 1932, Dutch became the official language of Flemish public primary and secondary schools. In that same year, the vernacular also became the language of the civil administration in Flanders. Meanwhile King Albert was growing ever more dissatisfied with his subjects. He became embittered and was subject to morose moods, which he tried to remedy by climbing rocks in the Ardennes on his own. This physi-

cal exercise became an addiction. Had Albert's pessimism anything to do with the concessions that the politicians were making to the Flemings? Or does it put a strain on a man to be the king of an artificial country, of a people whose adherence to the state has to be bought?

The fact that there was no generosity in the 'patriotism' of the Belgians seemed to bother him. Once, after he had spoken to a crowd, the King told an aide: 'It is themselves that they acclaim by acclaiming me.' When Count Louis de Lichtervelde told Albert that there were more monarchists now than ever before, he retorted: 'The bourgeoisie know that they are defending their own lives and possessions.' Belgium only appealed to feelings of greed, self-enrichment and immorality, never to sacrifice or charity. Belgium corrupted and perverted its inhabitants. The King complained, again to Lichtervelde, in 1931 about 'the decadence of the senior administration' and 'the ruinous abuses.'⁹³ He frequently announced his intention to abdicate and retire to Switzerland.

In 1929, Lichtervelde had an English-language hagiographic biography *Léopold of the Belgians* published in New York and London. Its preface states that 'the Belgians, now that they do him justice, have become passionately proud of the great and heroic figure of Léopold II.' The King knew this to be a lie. 'I am still to find the first Belgian who will defend Leopold II,' he told General Van Overstraeten in February 1931. Albert was angry that part of his uncle's fortune had been lost to him. 'The public could not bear the fact that the Head of State was rich. When King Leopold died, all the statesmen did their utmost to disperse his inheritance. They made the people sympathise with his daughters, who had become but strangers. Indeed, the monarchy was really robbed then.'⁹⁴ In public speeches he began to praise the late *bäcktelein* as 'one of those rare men whose deeds testify to their *grandeur* better than any words can.'⁹⁵

In the autumn of 1933, Count Broqueville proposed an amnesty for Flemish civil servants who had lost their jobs after the anti-Flamingant purge in 1919. The Prime Minister wanted a reconciliation between the Belgians, arguing that after bitter conflicts all nations try to reconcile the previously warring factions. In an artificial country like Belgium, however, magnanimity is impossible. It endangers the very existence of the state. Broqueville's amnesty bill led to fierce

93 Willequet 4, p. 254

94 Quoted in Willequet 4, p. 252.

95 Albert I in Namur, 1928, in Stinglhamber and Dresse, p. 234.

protests from Belgicists who took to the streets and petitioned the King not to be forgiving.

To Albert, too, an amnesty for the ‘unpatriotic’ Flamingants was out of the question. In January 1934 he personally intervened to prevent the amnesty. He wrote a stern letter to the cabinet condemning the bill, and had the letter leaked in the Francophone papers. The government at once buried its proposal. The Francophone press unanimously praised the King. ‘He has affirmed his right, both constitutional and sovereign, to revise the decision of his ministers, even of the entire cabinet,’ *La Nation Belge* wrote.

The prevention of the amnesty was Albert’s last political act. The King, not yet 59 years old, was found dead, his skull cracked, at the foot of the rocks at Marche-les-Dames in the Maas valley on the evening of 17 February 1934. He had set out to climb the rocks on his own in the afternoon. It was an easy climb, which he had often done alone. The fatal accident of a healthy and experienced mountain climber, on a spot he knew well, at once led to speculations. The British Military Intelligence suspected that the King had been murdered, either by French secret agents or by Francophile Belgians, because he was about to formally renounce the Franco-Belgian military treaty. When Colonel Sir Graham Seton Hutchinson defended this thesis, it led to official protests from the Belgian Embassy in London and to indignation in the Belgicist press.⁹⁶

By the beginning of 1934, the King was, indeed, on the point of formally renouncing Belgium’s military alliance to France. Not only was he unwilling to join France in a war with Germany over Eastern Europe, but he was also no longer prepared to assist France in case the latter was attacked by Nazi Germany. If France were to lose the war, he did not want his dynasty and Belgium to go down with it. Unlike *real* countries, artificial countries are perishable goods. Albert wished to return to the tried and tested policy which his House had always pursued: *stay out of any war unless you are sure to end up on the winning side*. ‘So far,’ the King told General Van Overstraeten in December 1933, ‘we have been loyal to our Allies, but, if need be, we will reconsider this.’⁹⁷ He was saying the same thing that he had been saying until September 1918. He had come full circle. Belgium was, once again, an unreliable ally.

96 *La Nation Belge*, 7 May 1934.

97 Quoted in Van Overstraeten 1, p. 100.