

# The Benelux Countries During The Second World War: Between Collaboration, Accomodation and Resistance

Dr. Dirk Martin, Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society, Brussels

## The German invasion

The pre-war policy of neutrality – pursued by the three countries – between Great Britain and France on the one hand and the Third Reich on the other could of course not prevent the German *Wehrmacht* from invading Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg on 10 May 1940. Luxembourg was occupied, the Netherlands capitulated after five days and Belgium after 18 days. The Grand Duchess of Luxembourg and Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands fled with their governments to Great Britain. A number of Belgian ministers left for London. However, King Leopold III, the King of the Belgians, chose to remain in his country, possibly with the intention of continuing to play a political role. This, among other reasons, led to the establishment in Belgium of a German military administration under General von Falkenhausen. The Netherlands were placed under a ‘civilian’ administration headed by Reichskommissar Seyss-Inquart. Luxembourg was to be governed by a *Gauleiter* and was simply annexed to the Reich.

All of the occupying forces, military as well as civilian, wanted the Low Countries to remain durably within the German sphere of influence. As to how this was to be achieved, and how much independence the occupied territories would enjoy, opinions differed. The demands of a war economy on the one hand and of a racial policy on the other did not always coincide. In the final analysis, however, all elements of the German occupying forces sought to justify territorial claims by using racial ideologies. But, understandably, the occupying authorities did not wish to acknowledge publicly these medium and long-term projects. At first, they tried to convey the image of ‘correct’ German behaviour and to create an atmosphere of goodwill by releasing a large number of prisoners of war (but not the Francophone Belgian prisoners of war).

## The illusions of 1940 and the collaboration

In the summer of 1940, much of the population and the political and state elite believed that the Germans would win the war or that a pro-German peace settlement would be achieved. Part of the elites in Belgium and the

Netherlands therefore embraced the idea of creating a new right-wing authoritarian regime, preserving the nation-state, in a German-controlled Europe.

In Belgium, the creation of a new government was considered. In the Netherlands, these ideas were reflected in the foundation of the *Nederlandse Unie* (the Dutch Union). As these schemes ultimately did not serve the German purpose, all initiatives in this field came to an end by 1941.

Nevertheless, the occupier would largely continue to rely on a ‘give-and-take’ policy with the national administrations and the economic elites in order to maintain peace and order within the occupied territories, and to make both countries participate in the German (war) economy.

The German occupier did not place much faith in the “major” collaborationist movements: the *Nationaal-socialistische beweging* (NSB) (National Socialist Movement) in the Netherlands, the *Vlaams Nationaal Verbond* (VNV) (Flemish nationalist movement) in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium and *Rex* in francophone Belgium. Before 1940, these movements had reached only a limited level of significance. Although they were gradually incorporated into the state apparatus, at the local as well as at the national level, and provided manifold services to the occupier, notably in the recruitment of volunteers for the *Waffen-SS* on the Eastern Front, they did not really succeed in taking state power.

The internal struggle for power between the different components of the German occupying forces was reflected in the different tendencies within the collaborationist movements. In the Netherlands, this was revealed through SS support for the radical Germanic wing of the NSB, while their “leader” Mussert more than once relied on the support of the representative of the Nazi Party (NSDAP) in the Netherlands. In Belgium, this discord was most

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obvious in Flanders where the Military Administration (largely for tactical reasons) supported predominantly the VNV led by De Clercq and Elias, whereas the SS tried to establish their influence through the *DeVlag* (German-Flemish Popular Community).

In Wallonia, the SS tried to get a foothold through the opportunistic actions of Léon Degrelle, the leader of *Rex*.

Although the solution to the administrative problems concerning Belgium and of the linguistic and racial frontiers of Europe was postponed till after the war, it nevertheless became more and more obvious that, as the war continued with its radicalising consequences, the small minority groups which in both countries had opted for the integration of their countries within a Greater German Reich gained ground, mainly through the support they received from the SS.

## The politics of the lesser evil and the Resistance

The Germans could not administer the occupied territories without the local civil and judicial authorities. Both institutions did however undergo a number of technocratic reforms. Although the *Militärverwaltung* left more manoeuvring space than the *Zivilverwaltung* in the Netherlands, both countries reached a similar level of accommodation with the German occupier. This accommodation was justified as a necessary politics of presence, a politics of the “lesser evil”. The fact that industrial activity continued and was thus producing goods for the Germans was initially rationalised in the same way: it was essential to safeguard employment and to be able to pay for food supplies. The “corporatist” reorganisation of the economy, the increasing state intervention, the abolition of the trade unions, the creation of a “united” workers’ union and other organisations (which met with only a relative success) were accepted without much protest.

It was not till late 1941 that some form of active protest appeared in the societies of both Belgium and the Netherlands. But, in a partly polarised society, there was above all a vast grey zone. The Germans called it a “wait and see policy”. Resistance activity was limited to a few

small groups who were pin-pricking the occupier and the collaborationist movements.

A number of factors led to a first relative growth of organised resistance: the British perseverance, the deteriorated material circumstances (the introduction of rationing), pre-war anti-fascism and patriotism (in Belgium more specifically the memory of the 1914-18 occupation), combined with the emergence of an active communist resistance after the German invasion of the Soviet Union. The subsequent German defeats, but even more the imposition in 1943 of labour conscription measures, which led to the deportation of large numbers of workers to Germany (in the Netherlands, this coincided with the deportation of the demobilised army to the Reich), resulted in a final breakthrough of the resistance. With it emerged an underground press, an aid to persons in hiding and, especially in Belgium, intelligence and sabotage actions. In the Netherlands, the resistance remained – on a political level – a partly neutral force, but in Belgium it had developed along more distinct ideological lines, from royalist circles who first of all wanted to maintain peace and order to communists who hoped for a social revolution. In 1944, in some parts of Belgium, a situation developed not unlike a civil war between collaborators and resistance fighters. Yet, a rough estimate indicates that less than 5% of the Dutch and the Belgians were active in a resistance movement. Approximately the same percentage applies to collaborators.

## German terror and the failure of “nazification”

Repression by the German SS and the police services (including the Gestapo), the military courts and the *Volksgerichtshof* (Popular Court) was merciless. Through a secret operation of deportations known as *Nacht und Nebel*, and other procedures, thousands of resistance members were sent to concentration camps or were executed by the *Zivilverwaltung* as well as by the *Militärverwaltung*. An even worse fate was reserved for the Jews. After a period during which many anti-Jewish measures had been imposed, 42% of the Jews in Belgium and 76% of the Jews in the (more law-abiding?) Netherlands were deported to concentration and extermination camps.

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Less than 5% of them were to return. It should be noted that the deportation was facilitated by the noncommittal attitude of “onlookers” as well as the Dutch and Belgian authorities, and also because of the conciliatory attitude of the Jewish councils.

As the occupation of both countries continued, it became increasingly clear that the German authorities would lose the battle for public opinion. The majority of the population was not very interested or nourished Anglophile sentiments. They were less and less influenced by the German propaganda campaigns. The impact of culture politics on the collaborationist movements was somewhat more successful, but the multitude of political concepts for the future, expressed by the supporters of the so-called New Order movements, as well as their internal conflicts, led the Germans to conclude that the collaborationist movements were unable to shape this future. It demonstrated the failure of four years of German politics of ideological control and manipulation.

In the end, the German plans to crush – on an ideological level – the “liberal” state and to make national-socialists out of the Belgians and the Dutch had failed. At the same time, the national administrations had demonstrated less flexibility in their policy of accommodation after 1942, even in the Netherlands where the administration was more “politicised” than in Belgium.

The economic exploitation of the two countries had however proved successful, even though the labour conscription measures had led to lasting anti-German sentiments.

## **The liberation and the return of the governments-in-exile**

In 1944, the occupying forces no longer demonstrated their “goodwill” of 1940. The hardening of the regime (as amply illustrated in Belgium in June 1944 by the replacement of the military administration by a civil administration under *Gauleiter* Grohé from Cologne) was however the herald of the liberation. Early September 1944, in just a few days, Belgium was liberated by the Allied troops. The Dutch territory north of the great rivers would, after the defeat at the battle of Arnhem, remain in German hands until the capitulation in May 1945. In September 1944,

the Dutch government-in-exile in London announced an indefinite railway strike in those areas. This, together with the chaos of the last winter months, effectively cut off supplies. During the so-called “winter of hunger” the Netherlands suffered many deprivations. Even the black market could no longer offer relief. Nevertheless, the ravages in the Low Countries were not comparable to the fate of Eastern Europe. The major part of the population had after all survived the war in bearable circumstances.

In September 1944, the Belgian (Prime Minister Pierlot) and the Dutch government (Prime Minister Gerbrandy and Queen Wilhelmina) returned from exile in London. During this period of exile, the Belgian government – for a long time incomplete – had at first enjoyed little respect from the British. Both governments had pursued a policy that attempted to reconcile national interests (notably with regard to their respective colonies, Congo and Indonesia) with the British and later the Allied war policies. It was in this particular context that the colonies’ natural resources (among others uranium from the Congo), as well as the respective merchant fleets, the Dutch navy and two army brigades were placed at the disposal of Allied warfare.

## **Renewal or restoration?**

Various ideas that had taken shape in London and in the occupied countries, from a stronger state to the abolition of pre-war “pillarisation” and finally to a radical-socialist solution, came to nothing after the liberation. The pre-war “pillarised” society was, for the greater part, restored. The fascist parties were eliminated, but the resistance movements (part of which harboured communist sympathies) were kept far away from power as well. It would seem that the moral and the material reconstruction, and the beginning of the welfare state, could only be assured through the (mainly Christian and socialist) “pillars”. Nevertheless, it would take years before a real period of stabilisation was reached in Belgium. This was not in the first place the result of the reorganisation of post-war society but of the ambiguous role of the King during the occupation period. In 1950, after a plebiscite that ended only marginally in his favour, he abdicated from the throne.

The trials of the collaborators would finally end this dramatic chapter in the history of the Low Countries.

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In the emerging consumer society, it was no longer opportune to stir up the war events. But, from the 1970s, it would become more and more obvious that this was an “undigested” past.