

BELGIUM AND THE COLD WAR: INTRODUCTION

- *Michael Auwers & Widukind De Ridder* -

This theme issue focuses on Belgium and the Cold War. It springs from a conference, held at the CegeSoma in 2022, which aimed at reinvigorating historical research into the Belgian dimensions of the conflict that divided the world for almost half a century after the end of the Second World War. In times of increasing polarization both within nation states and on the international political stage, it presents new research on an age when Belgium faced similar tensions. Drawing on a number of recent review essays, this introduction briefly evaluates Belgian Cold War historiography and situates the issue's articles within the field.¹

In late September 1951, the editorialist of *De Nieuwe Gazet*, an independent Antwerp-based daily with Liberal leanings, commented on the international politics of the Belgian government:

When a small country like ours, punches above its weight, it runs a great risk of seeing its politicians and diplomats everywhere as presidents of international bodies and gaining tremendous prestige, but afterwards having to pay, to the detriment of its own interests, for the damage caused by others. This is once again the history of Belgium in the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC) and in the European Payments Union (EPU).²

This quotation serves as a fruitful starting point for discussing Belgian Cold War historiography because its first part can be used for explaining how historians have recently evaluated the work of their predecessors, while its second part points at Cold War stakes which have yet to fully catch their attention. These two fragments will therefore structure this introduction.

Like in several other of the middling Western European countries, Cold War studies in Belgium were initiated by political scientists back in the 1970s. At the time, a shared focus on the start of the Cold War and concerns over the Soviet threat allowed the classical security paradigm to reign supreme in these national historiographies: researchers discerned an extraordinarily high impact of national security on the foreign policy-making of smaller states, whose leaders deemed that loyalty to

the alliance with the United States was the safest option.³ When historians took over from the mid 1980s onwards, generally a bit later than their peers from the larger European countries, they clung to the security paradigm but chose to study Belgium's implication in the Cold War from a biographical approach, focusing on the feats of the country's top politicians on the international scene. Often uncritically accepting the narratives these men formed in their memoirs and in interviews, historians created – as Kim Christiaens, Frank Gerits, Idesbald Goddeeris and Giles Scott Smith put it – “numerous biographies of Belgian political leaders, heralded as [...] makers of NATO, or pioneers of détente, which influenced the great superpowers and the course of world politics through all kinds of ‘special relationships’.”⁴ Again, this was no Belgian exception, but can be witnessed in the historiographies of both smaller and larger European countries, too. So Rasmus Mariager concludes for the Danish case that historians tended to accredit these politicians with more influence than they actually had, while David Reynolds found that similar works in Britain had “put too much beef on the British bone.”⁵ In order to fully apply *De Nieuwe Gazet's* comment on Belgian politicians (and diplomats) to Belgian historiographical debates, one should probably rephrase its first part as “When a small country like ours, punches above its weight, sees its politicians and diplomats everywhere as presidents of international bodies and gaining tremendous prestige, it runs a great risk of accepting their narratives as historical facts and of narrowing the

1. For an overview of the historiography, see MICHAEL AUWERS, “Koele minnaars van de Koude Oorlog: De Belgische historici en het Oost-Westconflict na de Tweede Wereldoorlog”, *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 52/3, 2022, 34-64. New scholarly impulses were provided by: KIM CHRISTIAENS, FRANK GERITS, IDESBALD GODDEERIS and GILES SCOTT-SMITH,

“The Low Countries and Eastern Europe during the Cold War: Introduction”, *Dutch Crossing*, 39/3, 2015, 221-231; Idem, “The Benelux and the Cold War: Re-Interpreting West-West Relations”, *Dutch Crossing*, 40/1, 2016, 1-9.

2. WIDES [Willy De Schutter], “Dwangpositie voor Amerika. Het is kwaad Kersen eten... België, de redder in de nood, behandeld als betichte”, *De Nieuwe Gazet*, 27 September 1951.

3. AUWERS, “Koele minnaars”, 36-38. See for the Nordic countries RASMUS MARIAGER, “Danish Cold War Historiography”, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 20/4, 2018, 182-183 and 192; and various essays in THORSTEN B. OLESEN (ed.), *The Cold War - and the Nordic Countries: Historiography at a Crossroads*, Odense, 2004. For the Netherlands, see the contribution of Giles Scott-Smith in this issue.

4. CHRISTIAENS et.al., “The Low Countries and Eastern Europe”, 188.

5. MARIAGER, “Danish Cold War Historiography”, 205-208; DAVID REYNOLDS, “Probing the Cold War Narrative since 1945: The Case of Western Europe”, in KONRAD H. JARAUSCH, CHRISTIAN F. OSTERMANN and ANDREAS ETGES (eds.), *The Cold War: Historiography, Memory, Representation*, Berlin and Boston, 2017, 68-69.

perspective of the Belgian Cold War experience.” The great risk is indeed not only that of self-inflation and self-congratulation but, since biographical perspectives are in essence reductionist, also that of missing most of the whole picture.

Belgian historians realized this from the mid 1990s onwards, when structuralist and constructivist approaches started shaking the predominance of national security in foreign policy making. More importantly, however, new paradigms in international Cold War research incited them to broaden the research field socially. A whole range of actors from civil society came to the fore and historians began telling more complex stories about the Belgian dimensions of the bipolar world order. Ideology became the watchword, not only to understand the practices of politicians and diplomats but also those of economic experts, consumer organisations, trade unionists, academics, solidarity movements and refugee leaders active in Belgium. In the process, the political history of Cold War Belgium gradually made way for research into its social and cultural dimensions.⁶

Convinced that the conflict “acted as a kind of force field that shaped thinking on Belgium as an international actor, as a nation-state, as a society – and thinking on Belgians as citizens, with obligations, loyalties, and adversaries”, Giles Scott-Smith in this issue provides a three-layered framework for furthering research into precisely these social and cultural aspects of Cold War Belgium. Building on the insights in the theme issues he edited with Christiaens, Gerits and Goddeeris almost a decade ago, he first deepens our understanding of ‘Belgium as Actor’ by arguing that the big-politician-small-country narrative does not allow us to analyse how the mechanisms of power actually work. It is indeed important to map out who the multiple actors are that claim to speak

for Belgium, how they do so and to what end. The ‘Belgium as Target’-layer, then, examines how Belgians were subjects of interest in information and influence campaigns set up primarily by agents of the superpowers. Finally, according to Scott-Smith, historians should take a closer look at ‘Belgium as Site’: be they Belgian sites on which a lot of Cold War movement took place, or the experiences of Belgians and foreigners during transnational network meetings in cosmopolitan Brussels.

The following articles can all be illustrated by one or more of these layers of interpretation. Each in their own way, they show how a wide variety of actors spoke in the name of Belgium in diverse ways and with different objectives. Thomas Briamont examines how the Belgian Communist Party served as a broker between such companies as Bekaert or holdings like the Société Générale and markets in the German Democratic Republic and the USSR. In 1956 the party set up Tracosa, a commercial enterprise specialised in East-West trade. Tracosa would soon speak for Belgian business interests – including for flagship companies such as Bekaert and Société Générale – through assistance in contract negotiations with purchasing agencies and ministries behind the Iron Curtain.

Knowing that Tracosa received a commission of up to 5% for every single transaction and such from both contracting parties⁷, Briamont’s article begs the question of party financing through Tracosa. Rumour indeed has it that the Kommunistische Partij van België – Parti Communiste de Belgique (KPB-PCB) would have received up to a yearly 100 million Belgian francs, in the 1960s-1970s.⁸ Serving as a commercial broker would thus have financed the party’s press activities. This might cast its waning electoral/political importance after 1956 in a whole new light. In conjunction with its commercial activities, the KPB-PCB may have

6. AUWERS, “Koele minnaars”, 38-50.

7. Archival research has revealed how strainful the relation between these agencies in the GDR and Tracosa really was. See GÁBOR SZILÁGYI, ‘*Guruló rubelek*’: *A kommunista pártfinanszírozás titkos útjai a hidegháborúban*, Unpublished PhD thesis, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, 2016, 174.

8. JEF TURF, *Memoires: Van Kernfysicus tot Vlaams communist*, Tielt, 2012, 162-163. Jan Debrouwere, former political director of *De Rode Vaan*, declared as much in several interviews in weeklies like *Humo* (09-4/1991) and *Knack* (08-1/2001).

simply began to operate as a broker for Belgian companies and -at least- a break-even, public diplomacy tool for countries behind the Iron Curtain. Instead of insisting on the party's political decline in the 1950s, historians would do well to focus on its economic and social-cultural significance for the policies of the long *détente*.

This ties in with Manuel Herrera Crespo's focus on *Opération Villages roumains*, a political activist movement established in Belgium in the 1980s in protest against the plans of the Romanian government to wipe rural Romanian villages from the map and transform them into agro-industrial centres. The initiative was closely intertwined with the Belgian government's policy of *détente*, on the understanding, however, that the activists' discourse was deeply resented by the country's official representatives. Since *Opération Villages roumains* openly contested the Belgian government's policy of *détente*, it had to transcend more traditional and centralized approaches to solidarity and funding. The policies of *détente* may thus unwittingly have fuelled the process of 'depillarization', that is the weakening of the ties between citizens and their political 'family'.⁹ It is therefore likely no coincidence that one of the founders of *Opération Villages roumains*, Paul Hermant, would go on to play a leading role in recent societal debates on sortition as a substitute for ordinary electoral democracy.¹⁰ Herrera Crespo's article also shows that, after the upheavals in Central and Eastern Europe that ended the Cold War, East-West solidarity led to frictions with North-South solidarity.

Following these studies of interactions across the Iron (or rather, *Nylon*) Curtain, Anse De Weerd's

essay shifts our attention further to what came to be known discursively as the 'Global South' and further away from government supported discourses.¹¹ She analyses the press representation of the writer and activist Yvonne Sterk as a Belgian female fighter for the Palestinian Cause, and also explains how Sterk herself engaged with the media frames applied to her activities in the Middle East.

Jan Van der Fraenen's article, by contrast, is rooted firmly in West-West relations and brings us closer back to Belgium. It deals with a fascinating aspect of the social and cultural history of the military during the Cold War: the Belgian Armed Forces in West Germany. These evolved from an occupation force in the wake of the Second World War to a partner in the defence of the West. Consequently, those officers and soldiers speaking in the name of Belgium had to repackage their message from a monologue to a dialogue for relations with the local population to eventually normalise.

Michael Auwers looks at a similar topic from the opposite perspective. The Cold War did not only lead hundreds of thousands of Belgian soldiers to serve in Germany, it also brought a smaller number of British soldiers to Belgium, and more specifically to the Campine, a rural area covering the centre and east of the province of Antwerp. There the British army constructed a handful of military camps and a few dozen depots in order to move troops more smoothly to Germany in case of a Soviet attack. Auwers analyses how the coming of the British allies was received by those who wrote for the weeklies published in the region's towns and villages. They did not share many of the claims made by government representatives and

9. On the process of depillarization: PETER VAN DAM, "Constructing a Modern Society Through 'Depillarization'. Understanding Post-War History as Gradual Change", *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 28/3, 2015, 291-313.

10. DIDIER CALUWAERTS & MIN REUCHAMPS, *The Legitimacy of Citizen-led Deliberative Democracy: The G1000 in Belgium*, London, 2019, 25.

11. Generally used as a catchphrase for the so-called 'developing world' and originally coined by American activist Carl Oglesby in the context of the Vietnam War, the concept 'Global South' gained considerable momentum post-Cold War, gradually replacing the equally problematic label 'Third World'. As a paradigm it not only seems to entrench victimhood instead of agency, it is also too vague since it geographically includes such countries as China, the world's second largest economy. We refer to it here as a discursive practice, that emanated from the Cold War period and is meant to challenge "the subaltern(ized) positionalities of global networks of power". See SINAH THERESS KLOSS, "The Global South as Subversive Practice: Challenges and Potentials of a Heuristic Concept", *The Global South*, 11/2, 2017, 1-17.

other national groups about what Belgium needed in order to remain safe.

For the Polish edition of his book on the Polish intelligence services active in Belgium, Idesbald Goddeeris carried out a lot of new archival research, the findings of which he presents in this issue. His article provides a case in point that historians should not overestimate the effectiveness of Eastern European intelligence services, but also that studying their archives almost automatically entails sensitive privacy issues. Those chosen by the Polish secret agents to speak to them about things Belgian, did not always do so freely (or soberly) and depended for the written record on how their interlocutors rendered the information given. As in his earlier research, Goddeeris also provides ample evidence of how the promotion of formal trade relations, between East and West, could gradually become intertwined with covert intelligence work in 1950s Belgium.

To be sure, rather than illustrating the Belgium as Actor-layer, Goddeeris' research foremost showcases the 'Belgium as Target'- and 'Belgium as Site'-perspectives, as he focuses on foreign intelligence activities targeting Belgians or exiles living in Belgium, yet at the same time debunks the myth of Brussels as a hotbed of Cold War espionage. To some extent, the same goes for Auwers' and Herrera Crespo's essays. Auwers explains how local writers assumed an ambivalent attitude towards the idea that (their part of) Belgium would have to serve as a site of Cold War activity, accepting its necessity but also fearing that the erection of British bases would turn their region into an actual military target. *Opération Villages roumains*, dealt with by Herrera Crespo, highlighted the involvement of Belgians in transnational, border-crossing activities and at the same time successfully targeted Belgian audiences, who massively supported the organisation. Moreover, Herrera Crespo's article also reminds us of the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaucescu's attempt to convince West-

ern European governments that his was actually a Third World country. This device will be dealt with in the conclusion to this volume.

In order to elucidate one of the central aspects of Cold War Belgium that historians have hitherto hardly paid attention to, let us now go back to the late September 1951 editorial in *De Nieuwe Gazet*. Its overall message is clear: by engaging in Cold War international organizations, Belgian politicians (and diplomats) would have unwittingly prioritized political concerns over economic interests. At first sight, some circumstantial evidence for statement can be found in their memoirs. While stressing the successes of their authors, the autobiographical writings of Belgian diplomacy's leaders from Paul-Henri Spaak to Leo Tindemans indeed offer little more than a taken-for-granted account of the interplay between political and economic liberalism. This can probably be explained by their lack of expertise and their reliance on experts in these matters. Proof of this hypothesis can be found in the recollections of one such expert, Jean-Charles Snoy et d'Oppuers, secretary-general of the Ministry of Economic Affairs (1939-1940 and 1944-1959) and Belgium's prime negotiator in international economic matters. In a 1984 interview, he stated:

In reality, the rapid sequence in which they [the ministers of economic affairs in the late 1940s] succeeded one another made it such that they never had the time to develop policies that were firmly their own. They relied on the positions of their department, that were the embodiment of the coordinating actions that I undertook in the name of my succeeding ministers. Whatever their political colours, I always benefitted from their trust. I saw them every single morning for half an hour. And, generally speaking, the economic policies of the post-war period were conducted with coherence.¹²

Belgium's experience within the European Payments Union (1950) hints at what this "coher-

12. Our own translation: JEAN-CLAUDE RICQUIER, « Comte Snoy et d'Oppuers: témoignage et souvenirs », *Revue Générale*, 4, 1984, 28-29.

ence” actually boils down to: a somewhat short-sighted focus on the interests of the country’s export-oriented yet languishing heavy industries at a time when its main competitors were using Marshall aid to successfully modernise their economic infrastructure and consumer industries. When asked in another interview: “How come you already had friends in such an important Ministry [the Ministry of Foreign Affairs]?” Snoy replied: “Listen, I had conducted doctoral studies in political sciences and diplomacy. My doctoral dissertation was about American tariff legislation. And I was consulted on these matters on many an occasion.”¹³ Neither in these interviews nor in the scarce literature on his career, Snoy’s words were critically evaluated, resulting in the impression that historians approached him with the same veneration as they attributed to the ministers he served under.¹⁴

In any event, his academic expertise arguably explains why Snoy was appointed president of the Benelux council in 1946 and president of the Interministerial Economic Committee in 1947. Alongside Paul-Henri Spaak, who was elected chairman, Snoy would serve as vice-chairman of the council of the OEEC in 1948. Both Spaak and Snoy would eventually sign the Treaty of Rome on behalf of Belgium in 1957.

Elsewhere in the editorial, no reference is made to these “politicians [such as Spaak] and diplomats”. Yet can the analysis of *De Nieuwe Gazet’s* editorialist about the “history of Belgium in the OEEC and the EPU” be considered correct? Not really. In the wake of the Second World War, the Belgian government was actually wholly concerned with safeguarding

the interests of the country’s export driven economy. With the Cold War looming large in 1947, Belgium was weary to give up its export markets in Eastern Europe. Belgian politicians and diplomats in fact focused on exports to the detriment of long-term economic growth and investments in Belgium’s decrepit (industrial) infrastructure and consumer industries. With the Marshall Plan on the horizon, the Belgian government stubbornly insisted on the problem of the transferability and convertibility of European currencies instead of on the more pressing issue of economic innovation. Only reluctantly would the Spaak government eventually accept Marshall aid and then solely to continue financing its exports by extending (dollar backed) credit to other members of the OEEC in anticipation of full transferability and convertibility.¹⁵ The European Payments Union (1950) would gradually allow for the multilateralization of payments, but from its inception, Belgium’s financial advisors proved to be tough negotiators. At one point the Belgians threatened to leave the negotiating table, sparking outrage over what the Americans dubbed “an economic declaration of war”.¹⁶ As a creditor nation, Belgium stood – broadly speaking – in the same kind of economic relation to most other European countries as the United States did to most countries in the world. Belgian economic and financial negotiators could therefore ease the balance of payments issues of their neighbouring countries, by for instance exchanging US imports for OEEC imports. The ferocious criticism vented against any such policies, by a newspaper with liberal opposition leanings, arguably points to the economic intricacies of Belgium’s position as both an allegedly ‘loyal ally’ and so-called trailblazer for European integration at the height of the Cold War.

13. Our own translation: THIERRY GROSBOS, *Benelux: Laboratoire de l’Europe? Témoignage et réflexions du Comte Jean-Charles Snoy et d’Oppuers*, Bruxelles, 1991, 51.

14. A subtle indication of this attitude can be found in Grosbois’ anachronistic reference to Snoy’s activities in the 1950s and 1960s as those of “the Count” (“le Comte”), whereas Snoy only received this particular noble title in the 1980s. See also VINCENT DUJARDIN & MICHEL DUMOULIN, *Jean-Charles Snoy. Homme dans la Cité, artisan de l’Europe 1907-1991*, Bruxelles, 2010.

15. GINETTE KURGAN-VAN HENTENRYK, « La Belgique et le plan Marshall ou les paradoxes des relations belgo-américaines », *Revue belge de Philologie et d’Histoire*, 71/2, 1993, 290-353; GINETTE KURGAN-VAN HENTENRYK, « Le Plan Marshall et le développement de la Belgique », in ERIK AERTS, BRIGITTE HENAU & PAUL JANSSENS (red.), *Studia Historica Oeconomica. Liber Amicorum Herman Van der Wee*, Leuven, 1993, 162-164.

16. E.S.A. BLOEMEN, “Harde franken, zachte guldens en de oprichting van de Europese Betalingsunie (1950)”, in E.S.A. BLOEMEN (red.) *Het Benelux-effect: België, Nederland en Luxemburg en de Europese integratie, 1945-1957*, Amsterdam, 1992, 65-66.

The ostensibly 'technical' nature of the post-war attempts at multilateral trade and payments liberalization, cannot conceal the increasingly hostile atmosphere between Belgian officials and their American counterparts around 1950. Controversy hinged on the underpinnings of the process of European economic and political integration. American diplomacy considered it part and parcel of the Cold War geopolitical order. Belgian political leaders, on the other hand, left financial and economic decision-making firmly in the hands of such experts as the governor of the National Bank and the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Economic Affairs. It gave them free rein to convincingly posture as political and ideological 'loyal allies' on the international stage.

Echoes of this narrative persist in the biography driven scholarship on Belgian diplomatic history that Cold War researchers have recently discredited. They have, however, done so by pointing to uncharted grounds in the field of social and cultural history rather than by challenging the veracity of the 'small loyal ally punching above its weight'-thesis itself.¹⁷

A political-economic approach to Cold War Belgium, as pled for by Widukind De Ridder, Bart

Kerremans and Dirk Luyten in the paper that concludes this theme issue, could remedy this historiographical deficit and reveal what was really at stake for Belgian policy-makers. To be sure, the story of European and American economic entanglement has been well told, but usually against the backdrop of the Marshall plan. The post-war economic order, however, only became fully operational in 1958. It remains to be seen, therefore, how Belgium tried to balance its political and economic interests in the context of détente and (de)colonisation. It was a time of massification and rising consumerism in which new social and ethical demands were being articulated.¹⁸ A time, as well, in which the pairing of national economic expansion and membership of an open world economy gradually became jeopardized, following the collapse of the Bretton Woods order in the early 1970s.

The above serves to illustrate that, while social-cultural approaches have successfully and necessarily broadened the historiographical scope beyond the confines of traditional diplomacy and foreign relations, political-economic looking glasses could help us see yet other aspects to the same themes in Belgian Cold War history. The following articles take us further along both paths.

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17. Possibly out of the conviction that ideology took precedence over economy in Belgian politics and diplomacy, as suggested in CHRISTIAENS et.al., "The Low Countries and Eastern Europe", 194: "Many [analysts of Belgian foreign policy] have often been tempted to understand Belgium's international relations and focus on economy over ideology as the result of the country's genesis and the particularities of its political history".

18. GISELLE NATH, *Shaping consumer interests: Belgian consumer movements between technocracy, social democracy and Cold War internationalization (1957-2000)*, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Ghent, 2016.

