EXPANSION VS. NEUTRALITY

How Belgian diplomats dealt with the 'military question', 1895-1914

- *Michael Auwers* -

In the decades before the First World War, discussions about the need to improve the number of the troop contingent increasingly pervaded Belgian political culture. After years of intense antagonism between those who wished to abolish the old recruitment method of drawing lots and those who wanted to maintain it, this debate eventually led to the introduction of limited (in 1909) and general (in 1913) personal conscription. Opposition to the lottery system was initially confined to royal circles and the upper echelons of the military. After the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, King Leopold II and his generals had come to believe that in spite of Belgium's guaranteed neutrality, its territory would most certainly be violated during the next, inevitable confrontation between the French and German armies. Moreover, they deemed the Belgian 'army of the poor' – wealthy citizens could buy out of military service – not up to the task of defending the country. In contrast, the Belgian government and parliament, which apart from a brief intermezzo from 1878 to 1884 were dominated by Catholic politicians believed that neutrality had sheltered the country from the war. As such, there was no need to subject more Catholic youth to the immorality of life in the barracks. It took several decades of rising international tensions combined with processes of internal political democratization before the so-called 'militarist' view would prevail over the opposition to general personal conscription[1].

In Belgian historiography, what contemporaries labelled ‘the military question’ has attracted a fair deal of attention. Fernand Lehouck, for one, has analyzed the different manifestations of antimilitarism before 1914. Luc De Vos, for another, has provided us with a meticulous account of the events leading to the introduction of personal conscription. Both authors focus primarily on the struggle between the King and the army leadership on the one hand and their civilian political opponents on the other[2].

More recently, Nel de Mûelenaere disputed this strict divide between military circles and civil society. From a political point of view, she argues, civilian support for the strengthening of the army dates back to the workers’ revolts in the 1880s. These convinced many doctrinaire Liberals, who saw their economic interests threatened, that personal conscription would diversify the social stratification of the army and would thus reduce the risk of socialist ideas infiltrating army ranks. After an intense propaganda campaign had led to a ban on soldiers publishing about such policy matters, from the 1890s onwards the civilian component of this Liberal-military coalition gained prominence and gradually widened to include several Christian Democrats and Belgian nationalists from different denominations. By the turn of the century, the ‘militarist’ doctrine had taken shape. It centered on the idea that the nation was exposed to both internal and external life-threatening dangers, that the solution to this problem was a reformed and stronger army, and that only the immediate introduction of personal conscription could remedy the situation[3].

De Mûelenaere’s thesis is tantalizing and convincing in the way that she shows how soldiers (both in active duty and retired), Liberal and eventually Catholic politicians, nationalist lawyers from the Brussels bourgeoisie, but also more provincial civil society organizations campaigned for the replacement of the lottery system and for the introduction of personal conscription. Yet, given the specificity of her focus on the national public debate, de Mûelenaere, like her predecessors, devotes virtually no attention to a social-professional group which was among the most directly involved in the ‘military question’ : the Belgian diplomatic corps.

As the executors of the country’s foreign policy of neutrality, diplomats indeed constituted the first point of contact for states towards which any reinforcement of the army was perceived to be directed. De Mûelenaere’s sole reference to these men is in her statement that to protect Belgian neutrality, the diplomatic corps and the Catholic government had put their hopes and faith in the upcoming German superpower[4].

1. For a brief introduction, see Rik Coolsaet, *België en zijn buitenlandse politiek, 1830-2000*, Leuven, p. 183-196. **2.** Fernand Lehouck, *Het antimilitarisme in België, 1830-1914*, Brussels, 1958; Luc De Vos, *Het effectief van de Belgische krijgsmacht en de militiewetgeving, 1830-1914*, Brussels, 1985, p. 262-361. **3.** Nel de Mûelenaere, *Belgen, zijt gij ten strijde gereed? Militarisering in een neutrale natie, 1890-1914*, Antwerp, doctoral dissertation, University of Antwerp, 2016, p. 9-87 and 209-237. **4.** *Idem*, p. 210.

This view comes from the literature on Belgian foreign policy before the First World War, which makes an implicit connection between the pro-German stance of Belgian diplomacy and a strict interpretation of neutrality. In the diplomats' – and the governments' – conception of Belgium's international status, so this literature suggests, any reinforcement of the military would risk exasperating the German government. This opinion was formulated by Baron Jules Greindl, the doyen of the diplomatic corps who also led the Belgian legation in Berlin, and was shared by the highest-ranking officials in the Foreign Ministry, Political Director Léon Arendt and Secretary-General Léon van der Elst. These men only altered their ideas at some point during the two or three years before August 1914, when it became clear to them that the next Franco-German war was inevitably imminent and that Belgium had to make its army stronger in order to defend its neutrality. To various degrees, scholars who adopt this narrative project the ideas of "the oracle" Greindl and his two colleagues on the entire diplomatic corps[5].

In this article, I will argue that in terms of attitudes towards militarization and neutrality, the Belgian diplomatic corps cannot be regarded as a homogenous body. On the contrary, long before the leadership of Belgian diplomacy had changed tack, several diplomats actively campaigned for the strengthening of the army. To prove this point, I will focus on the publications of three diplomats who did not agree with the hegemonic discourse in government and Foreign Ministry circles : Count Gontran de Lichtervelde (1849-1905), his son Count Baudouin de Lichtervelde (1877-1960), and Prince Pierre de Caraman-Chimay (1862-1913). Published in 1895, 1905, and 1913, their writings allow us to chronologically assess how the ideas of these diplomats relate to those of other Belgian militarist groups. What makes them particularly interesting is that their authors belonged to a social class which is not traditionally associated with the civil militarization movement : the Catholic upper nobility. The mere fact that these aristocrats partook in public debate, albeit under a pseudonym in two out of three cases, is testimony to their refusal to embrace the self-effacing stance that the strict interpretation of neutrality required of Belgian diplomats. Combined with the obligation for diplomats to always ask permission from the Foreign Minister before publishing on social-political issues, this attitude explains why very little of their writings can be traced. At least partly, the relative paucity of documents can be compensated for by looking into the private papers and personnel dossiers of these men[6]. The result of this research gives some insight in how deep 'militarist' ideas had taken root within the Belgian diplomatic corps in the years before the First World War.

5. Robert de Vleeshouwer, *Les Belges et le danger de guerre, 1910-1914*, Louvain/Paris, 1958, p. 37-49; Jonathan Helmreich, *Belgium and Europe. A Study in Small State Diplomacy*, New Haven, 1976, p. 142-146 and 153-169; Marie-Thérèse Bitsch, *La Belgique entre la France et l'Allemagne 1905-1914*, Paris, 1994, p. 247-253 and 432-449; Rik Coolsaet, *België…*, p. 187-188 and 191-194. **6.** Most accessible private papers are to be found in the State Archives of Belgium (henceforth SAB), while the personnel dossiers of Belgian diplomats are kept in the Archives of the Federal Department for Foreign Affairs (henceforth AFDFA).

Dood van de Plaatsvervanging

M

Mijnheer « KOPERGROEN », burgerlijke paus, lid der Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers;

Mijnheer WOE-WOE, lid der Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, muziekmeester der « Doornijksche Basserkens »;

Mijnheer ZONDERNAAM, lid der Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, laarzenpoetser der onder-officieren van het belgisch leger;

De deserteurs en achterblijvers uit ons leger die in Frankrijk verblijven;

De houders van huizen van plezier in België;

De zielhonden en bloedzuigers;

De afgekeurde vrijwilligers van heel het land;

De fils-à-papa en de leiren met gele handschoenen;

De vriendinnen van heel dit schoon wereldje,

laten u met diepe droefheid weten dat zij een onherstelbaar verlies komen te ondergaan door het bezwijken van hun geliefd en uitverkoren stelsel

De Militaire Plaatsvervanging

op de ellendigste manier gestorven in België, den 18 november, om 5 ure des avonds, na een vreeselijken doodstrijd, vergezeld van het algemeen hoongelach der belgische democratie.

De begraving zal in de grootste stilte plaats grijpen.

De lijkdienst, die later zal aangekondigd worden, zal men in het Paleis der Natie, te Brussel vieren.

Na den dienst zal de groene paus van België eenige woorden zeggen op zeer weemoedigen toon, om te wijzen op de overgroote vaderlandsliefde, die zijn gunsteling bezielde

Men wordt verzocht bloemen noch kronen mee te brengen.

R. I. P.

*By the end of 1909, opposition against the old recruitment method of drawing lots came to a head. In Socialist and other media, Conservative Catholic parliamentarians such as Charles Woeste (*Mijnheer *"KOPERGROEN") and Joseph Hoijois (*Mijnheer *WOE-WOE) were the main targets of criticism. (Photo from the socialist newspaper* Vooruit*, 20 November 1909, p. 1)*

This is important, for it enables us to better understand the debate over Belgian foreign policy during the war and its immediate aftermath[7].

I. Belgian diplomats, where they came from and where they wanted their country to go

Prior to making any attempt to reconstruct the diplomats' mental world, it is necessary to inquire what social and political backgrounds they came from. Socially, Belgian diplomats were born into rich and primarily aristocratic families. Indeed, a diplomatic career was a financial burden, and an aspiring diplomat could only enter the corps if his personal wealth was judged sufficient. In the years before the First World War, the Belgian diplomatic corps counted on average around eighty members. Of these men, about a quarter came from the (upper) bourgeois circles of (primarily) industrialists, while another quarter had fathers or grandfathers who had earned ennoblement by the Belgian King because of their services to the state as leading politicians or high-ranking officials. This means that about half of Belgian diplomats could date their aristocratic descent back to at least the early modern period, when their ancestors acquired the estates from which many of their families were still living[8].

Mapping the political environments from which Belgian diplomats sprung is a bit harder. After decades of Catholic government, it is tempting to put the overwhelming majority of the diplomatic corps in the Catholic camp[9]. If one counts the relatively few parliamentarians among the diplomats' fathers, grandfathers and uncles before 1914, a similar argument can probably be made. Yet such reasoning would paper over the reality that many diplomats came from families which did not want to be associated with the party-political squabbling that they perceived Belgian politics to have slipped into. Instead, they claimed that their loyalty lied with the King who, as it happened, ultimately decided about access to a diplomatic career[10].

As I have argued elsewhere, the extension of the franchise to include the entire adult

7. This debate was especially widespread in Belgian historiography during the 1980s. See for instance Michael F. Palo, *The Diplomacy of Belgian War Aims during the First World War*, Ann Arbor, 1978; Sally Marks, *Innocent Abroad. Belgium at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919*, Chapel Hill, 1981; Maria De Waele, *Naar een groter België. De Belgische territoriale eisen tijdens en na de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, doctoral dissertation Ghent, Faculty of Arts, Ghent University, 1989; Marie-Rose Thielemans, "Albert entre guerre et paix", in Marie-Rose Thielemans (ed.), *Albert Ier. Carnets et correspondance de guerre, 1917-1918*, Paris, 1991, p. 19-172. **8.** Michael Auwers, "To become a diplomat. Elements of a collective biography of the Belgian diplomatic corps before the First World War", in Michel Dumoulin & Catherine Lanneau (eds.), *La biographie individuelle et collective dans le champ des relations internationales*, Brussels, 2016, p. 107-129. **9.** See Bertrand Herremans, *Guerres de cabinets, ou, Petite histoire de l'impuissance de la Belgique dans la question nationale en Europe centrale, orientale et balkanique, 1918-1924*, Brussels, doctoral dissertation, Université libre de Bruxelles, 2007, p. 47. **10.** See Michael Auwers, *The Island and the Storm. A Social-Cultural History of the Belgian Diplomatic Corps in Times of Democratization, 1885-1935*, doctoral dissertation Antwerp, Faculty of Arts, University of Antwerp, 2014, p. 98-99.

male population in 1893, and the changes in political culture to which they gave rise, did much to strengthen Belgian diplomats in their choice for a career away from the Belgian political arena. It also imbued the diplomatic corps with sentiments of superiority towards the world of politics[11]. The memoirs of Pierre Orts are telling in this regard. Orts came from a bourgeois family of doctrinaire Liberals and began his diplomatic career in 1898. Commenting on the insufficiency of diplomatic salaries prior to the First World War, he stressed that "no diplomat who painfully experienced its consequences, would have even thought of complaining about the thievery of the State". On the contrary, he continued, "we drew glory from being the only public functionaries who served for 'the honour of serving'". The chronological distance between memory and lived experience did allow Orts to acknowledge that "the awareness of this superiority had contributed to develop in those of 'the career' a certain self-satisfaction not lacking in conceit"[12]. As these comments suggest, the feeling of superiority prevalent among Belgian diplomats was not only directed towards politicians but towards the wider public as well. It was also rooted in the diplomats' belief that they were simply better patriots than most of their fellow countrymen.

Leopold II shared their concerns about the Belgians' lack of love for their country. To him, a large part of the blame lay with partisan politics. In 1865, the King wrote in his diary that he "deplored the blindness and stupidity of the parties", and suggested as a solution "to throw a grand new idea in the middle of this furnace", that is to "raise the question of national expansion[13]. Leopold II's plan of imperial expansion as a means to bridge partisan divisions appeared to materialize when he acquired the Congo Free State in 1885. According to Vincent Viaene, the main social function of Belgian imperialism was "to unify the elites of a deeply divided country confronted with the onrush of democratization". In late nineteenth-century Belgium, the composition of these elites was similar to that of the Belgian diplomatic corps, namely predominantly Liberal industrialists on the one hand, and chiefly Catholic landed aristocrats on the other hand. This unification worked, Viaene argues, because Leopold II's imperialism appealed to "the atavistic instincts of the Belgians", that is, the longing of the elites for the hierarchical society of times past. In Belgian imperialism, Leopold II functioned as kings had for centuries during the *Ancien Régime*, as a kind of fountain of favours that sprayed ennoblements to bourgeois entrepreneurs, concessions and share certificates to aristocrats, and decorations to both[14].

Among the first to internalize the creed of empire were the families of the oldest aristocracy. These noblemen might have been attracted by the polity of the Congo Free State, an absolute monarchy where the full legislative, executive, and juridical

11. Id., *The Island…*, p. 135-145. **12.** SAB, I 184, Private Papers (henceforth PP) Pierre Orts, 389, "Souvenirs de ma carrière", p. 5. **13.** Leopold II of Belgium quoted in Vincent Viaene, "King Leopold's Imperialism and the Origins of the Belgian Colonial Party, 1860-1905", in *Journal of Modern History*, 80/4, 2008, p. 755. **14.** Id., "King Leopold's Imperialism…", p. 742, 744-750, 760, and 770-774.

power resided in the King. Moreover, the vast territories of the Free State offered many possibilities to the landed nobility, and might have accommodated their ascriptive claim to authority. In some ways, political life in the King's colony indeed was reminiscent to that in early modern societies[15]. The aristocratic families which took an active interest in colonialism were largely the same families that provided Belgium with its diplomats. Examples abound of d'Ursels, d'Oultremonts, de Lalaings, and Van der Straeten Ponthozs, who pursued a diplomatic career while their fathers, sons, brothers, or cousins aided the King, both from Brussels and in the Congo Free State, to realize his imperialist scheme[16]. They all shared a conception of patriotism in which concerns about political democratization and the need for Belgian overseas expansion played a pivotal role. As we shall see, this set of ideas determined the way they approached the military question.

II. Count Gontran de Lichtervelde and the military question in the mid-1890s

Count Gontran de Lichtervelde, a senior diplomat who also served as a member of the Superior Council of the Congo Free State, certainly imbued his sons with a sense of Belgian imperialist pride. While his second son Jacques served as a magistrate in the farthest corners of the Congo, his oldest son Baudouin combined his professional activities as a junior diplomat with writing publications to promote Leopold II's overseas projects[17].

In 1895, under the pseudonym of Philopator, or 'father-loving', which was probably a reference to both his patriotism and his devotion to the dynasty, Gontran published a small collection of essays entitled *Libres propos d'un Belge*[18]. Most of the eleven opinion pieces deal in one way or another with the Belgian political landscape after the 1893 extensions of the franchise. The tempering measure of the plural vote, through which upper class men like himself were allowed three votes, could not refrain Gontran from ardently opposing the new legislation. He ascribed to the popular masses characteristics like ignorance, selfishness, envy, ingratitude, and other qualities that – in his view – demonstrated their political immaturity.

In his essay about "Kingship", he regretted that even "the moderating influence of the Crown" could not give solace, for the masses were incapable of appreciating its subtleties. To prove that "the eagle [Leopold II] glides at altitudes that sparrows cannot reach", Gontran developed a reasoning which contains an interesting connexion between the extensions of the franchise, the military question, and colonialism. "That it may suffice", he argued, "to bring to mind in this regard the referendum, personal conscription, and the colonial empire of the Congo"[19]. The first

15. Rik Coolsaet, *België…*, p. 150. **16.** Michael Auwers, *The Island…*, p. 147-149. **17.** See Michel Mary, "Le Comte Gontran de Lichtervelde : une vie au service d'idéaux", in *Annales du Cercle royal d'Histoire et d'Archéologie du Canton de Soignies*, 28, 2006, p. 54-80; Jacques Willequet, "Lichtervelde (de) (Baudouin…)", in *Biographie coloniale belge* (henceforth *BCB*), vol. 6, 1968, p. 657-658; Baudouin de Lichtervelde, "Lichtervelde (de) (Jacques…)", in *BCB*, vol. 4, 1955, p. 524-525. **18.** Philopator, *Libres propos d'un Belge*, Brussels, 1895. **19.** *Idem*, p. 20-21.

Count Gontran de Lichtervelde was the first Belgian diplomat to publish his pleas for a stronger army as a means to satisfy his perceived need for imperial expansion and to channel the forces of democratization. (Photo Château de la Folie, Écaussines)

The foundation of the Congo Free State by Leopold II in 1885 increased the self-confidence and the feeling of self-worth among Belgian diplomats. It also influenced the way they approached the military question. Political map of the Congo Free State, 1907. 1/4.000.000. (Collection Royal Museum for Central Africa) example referred to the royal referendum that Leopold II tried to pass through parliament as an alternative for the introduction of universal male suffrage. The King proposed to be granted the power to consult the electorate directly on an issue and then to use his veto if the results of the referendum did not suit him[20]. Remarkably enough, Gontran framed the proposal as “a democratic veto which would have been a check on the Chamber and would have satisfied the progressive parties in a far less dangerous way than this plural vote that they declare insufficient and which still threatens to have the views of the ignorant masses prevail”. The King’s zeal for personal conscription, he proceeded, was “repudiated by bourgeois selfishness”, yet “would have been the best guarantee for those conservatives still dismayed by their recollections of 1886”. The diplomat dedicated the rest of his essay to the third example of Leopold II’s misunderstood genius : “We hear the most childish and inept prejudices being raised when dealing with the donation to Belgium of a colony … Not knowing anything outside of our frontiers... our democrats... do not admit sacrifices that do not immedialtely pay off... It is true that, by its essence, a purely democratic government has never been and will never be but a transitory ebullition, like a hurricane”. To him, the more durable alternative lay in a reinforcement of Leopold II’s political power. He therefore urged his readers to “listen to the lessons that [the King’s] African initiative has presented us with, and to accept the gift of the new Indies that his genius has brought out of the equatorial forests”[21].

The selection of examples of what Gontran labelled the King’s “enlightened and practical patriotism” reveal the main ingredients of what he himself believed that, in these times of democratization, the love for one’s country was made of : (aristocratic) guidance of the masses, (military) service to the state, and territorial expansion. In his view, the King functioned as the cook whose recipe needed to be followed. However, due to the relatively little attention that he devoted to personal conscription in his “Kingship” essay, it remains somewhat unclear how he understood this second ingredient of patriotism and how he believed it to tie in with the others.

Gontran reserved the elaboration of these ideas to his booklet’s penultimate essay. Quoting the words of Julius Caesar, in “*La question militaire*” he regretted that whereas the Belgians were once called the bravest of all Gauls, they had entirely lost their fighting spirit. During the Middle Ages, he continued, ‘Belgian’ knights and commoners could still be seen “spilling their blood on all the European battlefields”, but afterwards the Belgians seemed to have gradually accepted “the apathetic somnolence of tributary nations”. This was very problematic, he continued, for “we are surrounded by external and internal enemies” [22].

More than the obligatory reference to the heroes of the Belgian past, the notion of internal and external threats to the survival of the Belgian state played a central role in the ‘militarist’ doctrine that was taking form

20. See Jean Stengers, *De Koningen der Belgen. Macht en invloed van 1831 tot nu*, Leuven, 1992, p. 111-116. **21.** Philopator, *Libres propos...*, p. 21-22. **22.** *Idem*, p. 66-68.

in the 1890s. In her thesis, de Mûelenaere does an admirable job putting together the pieces of the cognitive framework through which the Liberal-military coalition assessed the need for personal conscription. As for dangers threatening Belgium from within, she notes that contemporary figures pointed to the moral and physical decay that the lottery and replacement system had given rise to. According to many active and former soldiers and their doctrinaire Liberal supporters, the subsequent lack of patriotism and manly virility could only be remedied by sending the largest possible amount of young men to the Belgian army[23]. As the quotation in the previous paragraph illustrates, Gontran agreed with this conception of the military as school of the nation. Personal conscription would certainly help to take the Belgians out of what he labelled their "apathetic somnolence" and might lead them to follow the example of their ancestors.

However, Gontran addressed himself to the upper classes and would likely not have accepted the way his fellow 'militarists' tried to sell the idea of personal conscription to a more progressive audience. According to de Mûelenaere, the new political culture had incited them to cover their argument "with a democratic sauce". In their writings and speeches, ex-soldiers and Liberal militants now condemned the replacement system because of the social inequality that it created and because it stimulated the divergence between the military and the democratizing society. By contrast, they speculated, the fraternization of the rich with the poor in the barracks would take the sting out of social unrest[24].

Gontran had a different vision when it came to the organization of society. His aversion towards the masses prevented him from making overtures to progressive public opinion. "The replacement", he argued in a discourse clearly aimed at the social elites, "has infected the high classes by making them used to no longer participating in the life of the nation". To him, the Belgian army was "a proletariat" that urgently needed to be "infused with new blood", in order to make its soldiers, who henceforth had to be recruited "among the elites as well as in the plebs", "worthy of their brilliant officers". If personal conscription were to materialize, he asserted, "we will see if rioters dare still roar at the foot of the Palace of the Nation". In other words, one could argue, he did not favor personal conscription for its class-conciliatory effects but because it enabled the wealthy to keep the poor under their thumb[25].

Clearly, the gulf was still too deep between the aristocratic diplomat Count Gontran de Lichtervelde and the democratizing forces that would eventually force the breakthrough in the military question. His views fit in better with those expressed by the 'militarist' lobbyists a decade earlier, when in the wake of the 1886 workers' revolts they still preferred oppression and discipline over democratization to solve the social and military questions[26].

Despite acknowledging the instability of international relations in the mid-1890s,

23. Nel De Mûelenaere, *Belgen…*, p. 76-80. **24.** *Idem*, p. 77-79. **25.** Philopator, *Libres propos…*, p. 70-72. **26.** Nel De Mûelenaere, *Belgen…*, p. 43-44.

the space Gontran granted to his argument regarding Belgium's external enemies amounted to only a quarter of the attention he devoted to his ideas about "the evils that come to us from within". About the former, he stated that "one does not have to be an expert in international relations to see that Europe expects more from us than a platonic declaration of neutrality". What Europe wanted, he specified, adopting an active, even personified notion of neutrality, was "to impose onto us a neutrality that, if need be, knows how to have itself respected, if events occurring at our borders would create the temptation to violate it". The diplomat therefore implored the government to make the people realize that "sacrifices of men" were necessary[27].

Gontran's views dovetailed perfectly with the ideas about Belgian neutrality current in military and Liberal circles. The status of obligatory armed and guaranteed neutrality, imposed upon Belgium by the Great Powers in 1839, sharply divided Belgian 'militarists' and 'antimilitarists' as to its interpretation. While the latter stressed that the guarantees permitted Belgium to maintain a marginal army and that any increase of the troops or infrastructure risked to jeopardize the shelter neutrality offered, the former found that armed neutrality meant that to fulfil its international obligations, the country had to make its army as strong as possible. To this legalistic interpretation a more emotional one was added. Indeed, 'militarists' contended that the passive interpretation of neutrality had spoiled the Belgians and had made them lazy. Since it was every man's duty to defend the national soil, Belgium's honour risked being tainted were other countries to be called on to defend its neutrality on the battlefield[28]. This emotional dimension was also apparent in Gontrans discourse, albeit in a more implicit manner. In the mid-1890s, his appraisal of personal conscription was still primarily conditioned by the consequences of political democratization.

In a way, Count Gontran de Lichtervelde was both a straggler in as well as the head of the pack of Belgians who advocated the reinforcement of the troop contingent. By the time he published them, his ideas about the connection between democratization and personal conscription were no longer shared by most 'militarists'. Conversely, in the first years of the twentieth century the inherent link he made between Leopold II's imperial project and the military question, as well as his candid colonial propaganda, echoed ever more loudly in these circles. A bit later than him, they had indeed discovered the King's colony as a means to stir up the Belgians' fighting spirit[29].

27. Philopator, *Libres propos…*, p. 68-69. **28.** Nel de Muêlenaere, *Belgen…*, p. 80-83. **29.** *Idem*, p. 213-216.

Count Baudouin de Lichtervelde had inherited a pronounced sense of Belgian imperialist pride from his father Gontran. For Baudouin, the creation of a state navy in service of King Leopold II's colonial projects would uplift the Belgian people. (Photo Château de la Folie, Écaussines)

III. Count Baudouin de Lichtervelde and the Belgian navy

Such a discovery was made by Gontran de Lichtervelde's son Baudouin as well. He shared his father's ideas about the connection between the democratization of Belgian politics, Leopold II's colonial empire, and the reinforcement of the military. At the same time, he took these ideas a little further and adopted a more militant stance towards Belgian politicians.

In 1905, the editors of the bulletin of the *Société belge d'Études coloniales*, whose goal was "to assist the King in his great African oeuvre", published an article that Baudouin wrote under the pseudonym Captain Baldwin in which he argued for the establishment of a Belgian maritime armed force[30]. In the wake of Leopold II's speech on the occasion of Belgium's 75th anniversary of independence for a more militant patriotism, Baudouin wrote that a state navy would have been "the most magnificent gift for the 75th anniversary of independence that the nation could give herself". He was convinced that it "would have greatly facilitated the task of Him [i.e. Leopold II] and of those who, with an admirable providence and an inexhaustible dedication, have become the champions of the country's expansion". According to Baudouin, Belgian diplomats had adroitly obtained an empire for Belgium and had safeguarded its interests afterwards, but the lack of naval power had forced them to let different occasions for further expansion pass by. He identified the opponents of Belgium's overseas empire as "those who remain indifferent to this new Belgium that creates itself outside of our narrow borders … because it is not situated in any electoral constituency"[31].

Apart from a few exceptions, the parliamentarians who had undermined the traditional Liberal and Catholic elite's power base after the 1893 franchise extensions were also the most militant opponents of Belgian imperialism. They more or less coincided with the Radical Liberal and Socialist factions in parliament. Doctrinaire Liberals were largely in favour of colonialism, as were most delegates of the Catholic Party. The popularity of the Congo enterprise among Catholic politicians had a lot to do with the rising prominence of corporatist ideologies in both Christian Democracy and socially conservative political Catholicism. As Viaene explains, both tried to embed democracy in traditional hierarchies of status and saw the nation as an organic community of estates held together by the Catholic faith and by devotion to the monarch. While doctrinaire Liberals tended to focus more on the idea of colonialism as an education in patriotism for the country's many new voters, such devotion to "Him", as Baudouin respectfully named Leopold II, also revealed itself in these circles. The social ideology of paternalism, prevalent in conservative Liberal milieus, went very well indeed with the image of the King as the father of a growing country[32].

30. Captain Baldwin [= Baudouin de Lichtervelde], "Leçon tirée de quelques évènements récents", in *Bulletin de la Société belge d'Études coloniales*, 12/10, 1905, p. 555-563. **31.** *Idem*, p. 555-559 and 562-563. **32.** Vincent Viaene, "King Leopold's Imperialism…", p. 770-774.

Despite the apparent political support of the parliamentary majority for Belgian imperialism, Baudouin felt that the superior interests of the country were still under threat. He felt this way because many of the politicians who supported the King's colonial oeuvre did not agree with his equation between militarization and colonialism. The young diplomat certainly knew that opposition towards the former had indeed a far larger political basis. In addition to most Radical Liberal and Socialist parliamentarians, who adhered to the principles of international pacifism, most Catholic politicians, too, had ideological reasons to disapprove of any measures that strengthened the state's military apparatus. A stronger army was indeed a larger army, and this meant that more Catholic souls would become exposed to the moral decay to which life in the army barracks was believed to lead. Furthermore, ever since the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 had left the Belgian soil untouched, Catholic governments felt strengthened in their belief that a strict policy of neutrality would safeguard the country from future European wars. In 1904, this line of thought spurred the Catholic majority into declaring that the state of national defence was excellent[33].

While Baudouin displayed as much devotion to Leopold II as his father did, he much more explicitly reproached the politicians for obstructing the royal project. The conviction that politicians were blocking the King's plans, de Mûelenaere argues, lay at the heart of the militarist lobby's stock of ideas. Their members indeed felt that corrupt and unreliable politicians had misled the workers and the farmers, to whom was attributed an unpolished yet sincere patriotism, about the external threats posed to Belgium. They therefore both appealed to the royal authority, which – they hoped – would bring the 'anti-militarist' politicians to heel, and wanted to reach directly to the people[34]. As we will see, Baudouin's thoughts about the practical effects of the state navy could serve as an example of the latter plea.

Other diplomats shared Baudouin's disappointment with the government's line of thought. In a private letter to Secretary-General Van der Elst, Baron Edmond de Gaiffier d'Hestroy claimed to feel very sad that the Catholic government had "contributed so strongly to accredit the opinion that the treaties offer safe shelter for our independence", and worried that "nowadays, the government fears that it is no longer able to master this current of opinion, gets carried away by it, and does not dare to propose any measure to which the masses would not agree"[35]. After many years of political and public consensus about its benefits, the international status of guaranteed neutrality had indeed become a vital component of the way Belgian society saw itself[36]. As a consequence, Gaiffier

33. Eliane Gubin & Jean-Pierre Nandrin, "Het liberale en burgerlijke België, 1846-1878", in Els Witte *et. al.* (eds.), *Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België I, 1830-1905*, p. 349; Michel Dumoulin, "Het ontluiken van de twintigste eeuw, 1905-1918", in Vincent Dujardin *et. al.* (eds.), *Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België II, 1905-1950*, p. 703-706. **34.** Nel de Mûelenaere, *Belgen…*, p. 84-86. **35.** SAB, I 210, Papiers du Baron Léon van der Elst, n° 52, Edmond de Gaiffier d'Hestroy to Léon van der Elst, 4 January 1909. **36.** Maartje Abbenhuis, "Too good to be true? European hopes for neutrality before 1914", in Herman Amersfoort & Wim Klinkert (eds.), *Small Powers in the Age of Total War, 1900-1940*, Leiden, 2011, p. 44-45.

seemed to suggest, many politicians did not dare question the 1839 treaty's traditional interpretation in times when the masses actually needed proper guidance to perceive the country's real interests.

Like Gaiffier, Baudouin connected this attitude to the electoral calculations brought about by the transformations of the political system over the previous decade. In a time when party politics dominated the political game and every vote counted to strengthen a party's power base, the masses' lack of interest in overseas expansion and their suspicion of militarization indeed presented a problem. Yet, Baudouin argued, a Belgian navy could remedy this lack of attachment to the expansionists' ideal of a greater Belgium : "One can note the fortunate influence of a State navy on the public mind. Every sailor will unconsciously propagate the ideas of expansion within his family, and will raise the interest of a whole group of relatives and friends in faraway things". Baudouin then addressed the Catholic government's determination to maintain Belgium's neutrality. A state navy, he posited somewhat inconsistently, would fit in perfectly with an "active, fertile neutrality" on the international scene. "The most modern tendencies of international law", he assured, "are disposed to grant an ever larger place to the idea of strong, triumphant neutrality to the detriment of the idea of the timid, self-ashamed neutrality". In his conclusion, Baudouin fulminated against "the ignorance, the indifference, and unfortunately also the bad will of some" that jeopardized the interests of the country. If the politicians acted now, however, "the new Belgian State navy would not be laughed at for too long; it will rapidly constitute an élite, and bring honour to the country it represents"[37].

As the above quotations show, Baudouin's discourse contains all the elements of the 'militarist' doctrine and echoes most of his father's ideas about the military question. With regards to Belgium's relations with other countries, father and son pleaded for an active neutrality that, as if it were human, stood up to fulfil the country's international obligations and to defend the country's honour. When it came to domestic politics, both father and son agreed with their fellow militarists to pursue a combination of autocratic and democratic measures. Yet while Lichtervelde senior's 1895 plea for the introduction of a royal referendum revealed his mistrust in the patriotic sentiments of the lower classes, his son, writing ten years later, stood closer to the democratizing forces within the 'militarist' lobby. He indeed believed that the Belgian sailors, most of whom would be recruited among the common people, would have the capacity to raise themselves above the crowd and to radiate patriotic fervour throughout their social environments.

There is another way in which the case of the Belgian navy is indicative of the ideological affiliation between Baudouin and some of the more advanced supporters of a stronger army. Much more explicitly than his father, the young diplomat associated the need for a national marine corps and the wider military question with the necessity of Belgian overseas expansion. This did not correspond with the

37. Captain Baldwin, "Leçon…", p. 556-559 and 562-563. .

primacy of national defence advocated by the more traditional 'militarist' circle of former officers and doctrinaire Liberals. According to them, a stronger army was needed in order to protect Belgian territory, not to make it larger by adding pieces to it[38]. The desire for a greater Belgium was, however, staunchly supported by a group of progressive jurists from the Brussels bourgeoisie. The leaders, Edmond Picard and his collaborator Léon Hennebicq, were members of the Belgian Workers' Party, yet belonged to a minority of right-wing socialists. They would have to leave the party in 1908 after controversies caused by their anti-Semitic and imperialist ideas[39]. In the decade before the First World War, Hennebicq grew to become the theoretician of Belgian nationalism. Although this movement remained very small before the outbreak of the war, it did receive support from Liberal journalists and publicists, and at a later stage from young Christian Democratic lawyers. Hennebicq and his collaborators developed an ideology of Belgian nationalism which, apart from its advocacy of universal single male suffrage, contained nearly all elements of the discourses of expansionist diplomats such as the Lichterveldes. At the domestic level, nationalists fiercely criticized partisan politics for impeding the elevation of the masses to a national ideal. According to Hennebicq and his friends, this ideal would find its realisation primarily outside of Belgium's borders. However, the nationalists were more extreme than the Lichterveldes in their assessment of Belgian neutrality. In their opinion, it emasculated a nation which needed to expand in a struggle with other nations. Hence their great admiration for Leopold II. The nationalists believed that the struggle between nations would primarily be fought in the economic sphere yet did not exclude war as a legitimate means to increase the greatness and health of the nation[40]. It should come as no surprise, then, that they attached the greatest importance to the creation of a state navy. According to them, Belgium had to show more ambition in geopolitics and start acting like the colonial superpower that it was[41].

If one had to locate Gontran and Baudouin de Lichtervelde ideologically within the conglomerate of supporters of a stronger army, their passion for Belgian overseas expansion would lead one to place them among the more radical 'militarists'. At least partly, this can be explained by Belgium's changing domestic politics and international position in the decades before the First World War. While the democratization of the Belgian political landscape left the upper classes

38. Nel de Muêlenaere, *Belgen…*, p. 217-218. **39.** Bart Coppein, *Dromen van een nieuwe samenleving : intellectuele biografie van Edmond Picard*, Brussels, 2011, p. 270-305; Maarten Van Ginderachter, *Het rode vaderland. De vergeten geschiedenis van de communautaire spanningen in het Belgische socialisme voor WO I*, Tielt, 2005, p. 208-209 and 299. **40.** Eric Defoort, "Het Belgische nationalisme voor de eerste wereldoorlog", in *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis*, 4, 1972, p. 524-542. **41.** This belief incited Hennebicq to seek a rapprochement with the Antwerp-based *Ligue maritime belge*, whose nationalist ideas he stimulated and of which he attained the presidency in 1911. See Lieven Saerens, *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad. Een geschiedenis van Antwerpen en zijn joodse bevolking (1880-1944)*, Tielt, 2000, p. 235-237; Nel de Muêlenaere, *Belgen…*, p. 217-218.

somewhat disappointed and drove some of their members towards careers with a more traditional hierarchical structure, such as diplomacy, the foundation of the Congo Free State by Leopold II increased the self-confidence and the feeling of self-worth among Belgian diplomats. The Belgian King counted on them to defend the colony's position on the international scene. Moreover, defending the Congo's interests gave many diplomats the feeling that they were representing an important power with worldwide interests. Such interests, they believed, needed to be supported by a strong army. The way these diplomats perceived their functions differed greatly from the way many older colleagues had perceived theirs from the late 1840s until the early 1880s, when they were mainly required to stay away from conflicts between Belgium's great European neighbours[42].

IV. The patriotism of Prince Pierre de Caraman

After the Belgian state took over the Congo in 1908, the colony moved from an absolute monarchy towards a structure that granted a larger place to parliamentary control[43]. This did not seem to have influenced the attachment of diplomats of the highest aristocracy to the empire that Leopold II had bestowed upon Belgium. Neither did it weaken their militancy to protect and strengthen the realm. On a Thursday evening in March 1913, the senior diplomat Prince Pierre de Caraman Chimay entertained his audience at the Hotel Ravenstein in Brussels for more than two hours with a lecture entitled "*Patriotisme et Patrie*"[44].

Contrary to the Lichterveldes, Caraman chose not to make his arguments under an alias. He made a public performance and even allowed for his speech to be published with a clear reference to his authorship. This suggests that the Foreign Minister did not oppose the initiative. A lot had changed indeed since "Philopator" and "Captain Baldwin" wrote their opinion pieces. In the years before the First World War, domestic voices demanding that the state increase its military resounded much louder. These were times when tensions between European countries were rising much higher than in the mid-1890s. In 1909, the majority of parliamentarians were eventually persuaded to replace the lottery system with personal conscription. However, the Belgian political landscape was still divided over whether or not to replace the limited draft of one man per household with general conscription. Combined efforts by the most convinced advocates of the wider recruitment system, namely the new King Albert and the head of government Charles de Broqueville, would lead to the adoption of the general conscription law just before the summer of 1913[45].

In the meantime, Caraman had been giving lectures to support the King's point of view. On that Thursday in March, he would not

42. Vincent Viaene, "King Leopold's Imperialism…", p. 770-774. **43.** Guy Vanthemsche, *Congo. De impact van de kolonie op België*, Tielt, 2007, p. 38-39. **44.** Pierre de Caraman Chimay, *Patriotisme et patrie*, Paris and Brussels, 1913. **45.** Jan Velaers, *Albert I. Koning in tijden van oorlog en crisis, 1909-1934*, Tielt, 2009, p. 167-174.

have had to do much convincing, for he was addressing an audience invited by the *Société belge d’Études coloniales*. Starting from the question “Do we have to secure our national defence ?”, Caraman promised to explain why the answer could only be “immediately”[46]. His discourse includes many of the elements that constituted the vision of the proponents of the ‘Greater Belgium’ idea and gives additional insight into how they conceived of Belgian patriotism as a combination of effectively dealing with a democratizing society, strengthening the army, and promoting the idea of territorial expansion. Contrary to the writings of both Lichterveldes, Caraman’s speech remained somewhat vague on the practicalities of the military question. Clearly advocating the introduction of general personal conscription, he only referred to it once, and in rather guarded terms. This probably had to do with the metaphysical topics in the title of his lecture.

Like Gontran de Lichtervelde, Caraman started his speech with a reference to the Belgian people’s historical pugnacity, which after 1830 seemed to have gradually waned. According to him, the Belgians had successfully struggled to overcome “centuries of submission and constraint” to the extent that “each inch of our territory attests to the price of what heroic battles our liberties have been conquered”. This history, Caraman argued, made it impossible “to remain deaf to the sacred prayer that resounds from our hills and our plains, and which rises from the depths of our industrial centres as well as from the cosiness of the pastures of Flanders”. In other words, the people wanted to strengthen the Belgian army. Somewhat paradoxically, for in Caraman’s view the wish to reinforce the military was evidence of patriotism, he then declared that “we” were no longer “vigilant patriots”. Caraman therefore set out to examine “the causes that have put our patriotism to sleep”. In addition to “race rivalries”, by which he meant tensions between Belgium’s two linguistic communities, and an excessive identification with their own village instead of with their country, he charged the Belgians with a general indifference towards foreign affairs and especially with having too much confidence in “the obligations of the Great Powers towards us”, that is in the guarantee of Belgian neutrality[47].

Reading through the lines, Caraman’s insertion in his text of a paradox of “Belgians” – a term that he alternates with the personal pronouns “we” and “us” – who wished to strengthen the army yet whose patriotism was somnolent, suggests that he was actually talking about two different groups of Belgians : the common people on the one hand, and the politicians on the other hand. While he implicitly accredited the former with sincere yet uncultivated patriotic feelings, he reproached – again very implicitly – the latter with discouraging these sentiments. More specifically, Caraman’s reproaches seem primarily directed towards those Catholic politicians who still opposed the reinforcement of the military. A few years earlier, the Catholic government had been able to pass the law on general conscription through parliament only with the support of the Liberal and Workers’ Parties; the majority of its own parliamentarians dissen-

46. Prince Pierre de Caraman Chimay, *Patriotisme…*, p. 7-10. **47.** *Idem*, p. 7-25.

ted[48]. Many of the opponents had their power base in the predominantly rural Flemish constituencies, whose interests they, in Caraman's opinion, let prevail over the national interests[49].

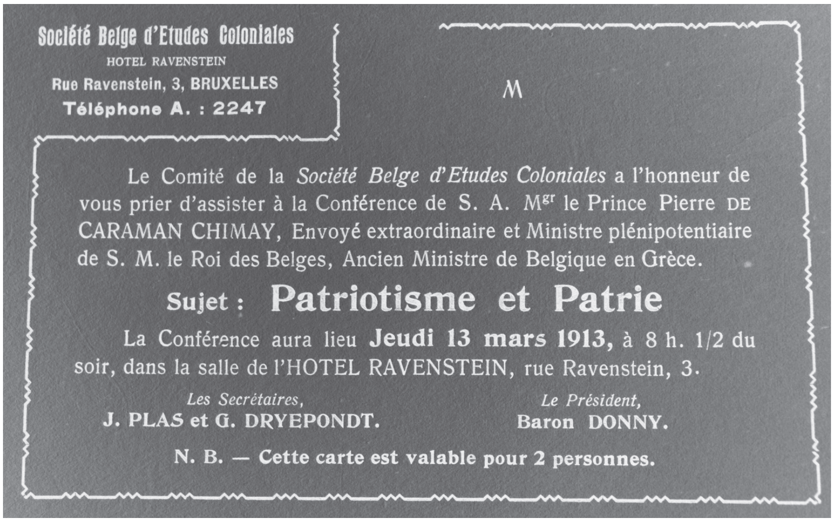
For Caraman, patriotism implied not only taking the state as reference for the nation but also looking beyond the nation and actively contributing to uphold and strengthen the country's position in the world. To prove why such attitude was justified, Caraman wished to analyse the economic, political and social role that Belgium had played in the world since 1830. While he devoted, in very general terms, less than one minute to Belgian social justice, which might have revealed the importance he attached to it, Caraman went to great lengths to honour Belgium's economic accomplishments. He stressed that "despite possessing only an intermediary portion of the Scheldt and Meuse basins, which nourish our territory", the Belgians had very quickly completed "the three distinct phases that characterize the life of peoples" and that led to the country's "industrial and commercial superiority". These phases could be labelled as foreign investments in Belgium, autarchy, and Belgian investments in foreign lands[50].

Caraman's discussion of the third phase of the economic life of the Belgians segued seamlessly to the political achievements of his compatriots. According to the prince, these could all be subsumed under the heading "Expansion". He qualified the acquisition of the Congo by the "genius" Leopold II as an "almost unreal … miracle" and as "a phenomenon of inestimable bearing". He also claimed to believe that it could change "the very physiognomy of our people." Convinced that "the air we breathe has widened and vivified", Caraman rhetorically asked whether "the great winds of the large sea, that are so heady, whose scent inebriates the young and incites them, en masse, to sublime sacrifices, are not already blowing through our smallest villages?" [51].

With reference to popular enthusiasm for Belgian imperialism, the right answer to this rhetorical question would be 'no'. The so-called 'colonial mind' was very much absent in the Belgians. Admittedly, the number of Caraman's compatriots who embarked for the Congo almost doubled between 1908 and 1913, but still remained well under four thousand (out of a total population of 7.5 million). Among the white population of the colony, the relative share of Belgians hardly ever amounted to six out of ten[52].

Yet if one were to answer Caraman's rhetorical question in the light of his speech's main issue, that is whether the Belgians should assure their national defence, the answer would be slightly less negative. By 1913, the propaganda activities of the militarists had indeed affected large sections of the population. As noted by journalists of *Le Soir*, Belgium's most widely read newspaper, it had made them well-disposed towards the idea of military service[53]. Of course, to suggest that ordinary people were ready to risk their life

48. Luc De Vos, *Het effectief*, p. 303-312. **49.** For a more subtle evaluation of this phenomenon, see Henk de Smaele, *Rechts Vlaanderen. Religie en stemgedrag in negentiende-eeuws Vlaanderen*, Leuven, 2009. **50.** Prince Pierre de Caraman Chimay, *Patriotisme…*, p. 28-34. **51.** *Idem*, p. 28-39. **52.** Guy Vanthemsche, *Congo…*, p. 53-57. **53.** Nel de Mûelenaere, *Belgen…*, p. 234-235 and 282-285.



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M

Le Comité de la *Société Belge d'Etudes Coloniales* a l'honneur de vous prier d'assister à la Conférence de S. A. Mgr le Prince Pierre DE CARAMAN CHIMAY, Envoyé extraordinaire et Ministre plénipotentiaire de S. M. le Roi des Belges, Ancien Ministre de Belgique en Grèce.

Sujet : Patriotisme et Patrie

La Conférence aura lieu **Jeudi 13 mars 1913,** à 8 h. 1/2 du soir, dans la salle de l'HOTEL RAVENSTEIN, rue Ravenstein, 3.

Les Secrétaires,
J. PLAS et G. DRYEPONDT.

Le Président,
Baron DONNY.

N. B. — Cette carte est valable pour 2 personnes.

On 13 March 1913, the Société belge d'Études Coloniales *invited Prince Pierre de Caraman Chimay to discuss Belgian patriotism. At that time, the Belgian political landscape was divided over the adoption of a general personal conscription law. Caraman was much in favour of such a measure. (Photo Universiteitsbibliotheek Antwerpen MAG 39.7.27)* for the country's overseas expansion, as Caraman did, would be a bridge too far. Nevertheless, Caraman's suggestion is understandable. While he probably had little contact with common people, he did read the papers and noticed that military parades in the capital attracted ever larger and more loudly cheering crowds. His cognitive framework indeed connected support for the strengthening of the army with advocacy of Belgian imperialism, and subsumed both under the heading of patriotism. His perception of such a patriotic attitude in the masses undoubtedly helped him to come to terms with the democratizing Belgian society.

The primacy of expansion in his cognitive framework of the military question placed Caraman, like both Lichterveldes, in the nationalist segment of the 'militarist' lobby. In this regard, one can detect a further similarity with the ideas of Belgian nationalism. It lies in the memory of what nationalists labelled the drama of 1839, when the Treaty of London stipulated that the Belgian government had to give up the Dutch territories it occupied since 1830, namely parts of the provinces of Zeeland, Limburg, and Luxembourg. Caraman's subtle remark in 1913 that Belgium had flourished "despite possessing only an intermediary portion of the Scheldt and Meuse basins" was indeed a direct reference to what nationalists and expansionist diplomats alike perceived as a tragedy. Hennebicq and his friends were more explicit in venting their disappointment. They labelled the "robberies" of the lost territories now as "a wound barely healed", and then as "injuries that had begun bleeding again" [54].

As these quotations illustrate, the resemblances between the discourses of nationalists and expansionist diplomats not only lay in their contents but more tangibly in the organic imagery that punctuated the ideas of both groups. Such commonalities would seem to suggest that there were possibilities for some kind of entente between aristocratic and high bourgeois diplomats and the forces of democratization, which the nationalists claimed to represent.

V. A Generation Gap ?

More than both Lichterveldes yet much in line with the ideas of (other) Belgian nationalists, Caraman manifested his aversion towards Belgian neutrality : "After having affirmed our virility in front of the whole world" , he complained, "we keep our eyes stubbornly fixated upon pieces of paper and treaties". Caraman wondered whether "some of us have not thoughtlessly let themselves be hypnotized by this all too often repeated word 'neutrality'". He claimed that he would "easily succeed" in proving them wrong, were it not that his position as a diplomat refrained him from doing so. He concluded this part of his lecture by expressing his conviction that "talking like this will not discredit me as hostile towards the world of diplomacy, which I have served with passion and to which I have the honour of belonging"[55].

As Caraman's comment suggests, not all diplomats unconditionally embraced the expansionist ideology. To be sure, by the time the Belgian state had taken over the Congo

54. Eric Defoort, "Het Belgische nationalisme...", p. 527-528. **55.** Prince Pierre de Caraman Chimay, *Patriotisme...*, p. 39-41.

Free State no Belgian diplomat would contest the country's right to a colony or blame Leopold II for having acquired one. Likewise, by 1913 it would have been very hard to find a single Belgian diplomat who still opposed the strengthening of the military. However, actively guided by Secretary-General Léon Van der Elst, Political Director Léon Arendt, and the doyen of the diplomatic corps Jules Greindl, part of the older generation of Belgian diplomats still clung to neutrality as Belgium's best foreign policy option. Although initially supportive of the royal enterprise, Leopold II's aggressive colonial policy had led these men to start pleading for the precedence of neutrality over empire, and to approach the military question accordingly[56]. By the time the Agadir crisis of 1911 had broken out, the rising tensions between France and Germany had led these former 'antimilitarists' to adopt a more active notion of an armed neutrality, similar to the one advocated by the Liberal-military coalition a few decades earlier[57]. At the same time, Caraman and other, mostly younger diplomats, had grown averse to the very concept of neutrality. They believed that it restricted the possibilities for expansion, which in their eyes was vital to the health of the Belgian nation. They might have even agreed with their fellow nationalists that an alliance with France best suited Belgium's worldwide interests[58].

If Pierre Orts is to be believed, there was indeed a conflict of the generations going on inside the Belgian diplomatic corps. In his memoirs, he illustrated how in a younger generation of foreign policy executors, the concepts of imperialism and (anti-)neutrality were inextricably intertwined : "With a few… young functionaries, we formed the 'generation of the Congo', the one that claimed that their horizons and preoccupations had been enlarged by the contact with the African oeuvre of Leopold II… We felt very strongly that to preserve our recently acquired colonial domain, it was necessary to accept certain risks. The pusillanimity of our elders irritated and perturbed us. It is from that epoch [*i.e.* around 1905] that my aversion for the regime of neutrality stems"[59].

In 1898, Orts had received his first diplomatic assignment as an attaché to the Belgian legation in Paris, where he would stay for almost five years. The way he portrayed the head of that legation reveals much about how the younger generation of Belgian diplomats viewed their elders. According to Orts, the head of the legation Baron Auguste d'Anethan "personified the conventional type of the old school diplomat… Utterly circumspect in his conversations, he talked little and weighed his words as if his slightest verbal imprudence could have disturbed the repose of Europe… Baron d'Anethan was moulded to the conceptions that prevailed in Belgian official spheres as to the self-effacement that in international relations imposed itself upon neutral Belgium… This well-bred man found himself very uprooted in the French official world,

56. Michael Auwers, *The Island…*, p. 77-81. **57.** See Marie-Thérèse Bitsch, *La Belgique…*, p. 470-473; Jonathan Helmreich, *Belgium…*, p. 163; Rik Coolsaet, *België…*, p. 193-194. On the Agadir, or Second Moroccan crisis, see Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe went to war in 1914*, London, 2013, p. 204-214. **58.** Rik Coolsaet, *België…*, p. 194-195; Michaël Auwers, *The Island…*, p.256-260. **59.** SAB, I 184, "Papiers Orts", n° 389, "Souvenirs de ma carrière", p. 22.

where uneducated persons and impertinent politicians abounded… He usually associated with a few old circle members, aristocrats and reactionaries… The minister of Belgium ignored the living France"[60].

It is clear that Orts used the example of Baron d'Anethan to denounce an entire generation of Belgian diplomats. First he stressed that these diplomats had been long outdated when they were sent abroad to defend Belgium's interests. By closely associating them with the policy they had to carry out, Orts then condemned neutrality as long superseded. In his opinion, neither the policy of Belgian diplomacy nor the character of those charged with implementing it suited the country's true interests. Yet he could conclude this section of his memoirs on a cheerful note. The junior diplomats at the Paris legation, among whom Orts took special note of Caraman, "might not all have been high-flyers, but I found in them conscientious and sound servants of the State, who were ardently national in a time when in our country patriotism slumbered"[61]. From the expansionist's point of view, at least, a brighter future appeared to lie ahead when these men would become senior diplomats.

Jonathan Helmreich has put forth the view that Baron d'Anethan and the other predecessors of the Congo generation had formed a generation themselves, distinct from the first group of Belgian diplomats. "The replacement of the old revolutionaries by men of a new generation", Helmreich argues, occurred roughly in the fifteen years before the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871. Explaining why Belgian foreign policy executors did all they could to avoid getting involved in the Franco-Prussian conflict while it could have gained them Luxembourg, one of the provinces that were 'lost' after the 1839 Treaty of London, Helmreich argues that in addition to changes on the domestic and European scenes, the "hotspurs" had been "mellowed by time" and the new generation of diplomats was much more imbued with the self-effacing diplomacy required by the country's neutrality[62]. The first 'generation of hotspurs' had a lot in common with the third 'generation of the Congo'. Contrary to the second 'generation of neutrality', they favoured a proactive stance in international relations that was inspired by what could be labelled as a positive geopolitical consciousness. The generation of hotspurs, or – to put it more respectfully – the generation of revolutionaries, strained themselves in the 1830s to obtain legitimate and full possession of Luxembourg, Dutch Limburg, and Flemish Zeeland, which belonged to the Netherlands but were occupied by the Belgian army[63]. The generation of the Congo had followed the lead of Leopold II and found the greater Belgium beyond Europe. Yet the memory of the struggle that their grandfathers had lost in 1839 burned vividly in their minds. Indeed, Caraman's remark about the Scheldt and the Meuse also referred to the claim of the first generation.

No strict chronological boundary can be drawn between the different generations of Belgian diplomats. If the first generation encompasses those in active service before 1848, when Belgium gained international

60. *Idem*, p. 3-4. **61.** *Idem*, p. 4. **62.** Jonathan Helmreich, *Belgium…*, p. 95-103. **63.** See Rik Coolsaet, *België…*, p. 63-72.

recognition as a stable, neutral state, and considering that full diplomatic careers lasted between thirty five and forty years, an artificial division between the generation of neutrality and the generation of the Congo would more or less coincide with the recognition of Leopold II's colonial empire in 1885. This would mean that Caraman, who entered the service in late December 1884, was one of the first scions of this generation.

Yet premature births were very common in this region of the Belgian diplomatic corps' mental world. What to say of Émile de Borchgrave, who entered the diplomatic career in the 1860s and whose services to the Congo Free State earned him a baron's title in the 1890s[64] ? Head of the Belgian legation in Vienna in the early 1900s, Borchgrave continued to do what he had in done in the previous decades : publishing historical treatises which argued that the Belgians had always been passionate for overseas expansion. In a study about the Ostend Company in the early eighteenth century, he connected this historical propensity very subtly to a topical subject in the debate about the national defence, expressing his astonishment at the contrast between "the patriotic efforts" of the Company's sailors and the current "indifference of the Belgians for the creation of a national navy"[65].

Then there was Baron Paul Guillaume, son of the former Minister of War General Henri Guillaume, who as early as 1870 had tried to pass personal conscription through parliament, and had resigned after failing to do so[66]. Paul Guillaume entered the diplomatic corps around this time and contributed for many years to the establishment of Leopold II's colonial empire[67]. As minister plenipotentiary decades later, he started taking an active interest in the occupied territories that Belgium had to give up in 1839. In 1902, this resulted in his publication of a two-volume history of the river Scheldt since the independence of Belgium[68]. It would have also resulted in a "patriotic" history of Belgian diplomacy in the 1830s, were it not that Foreign Minister Paul de Favereau explicitly forbade Guillaume from writing it as long as he was in the diplomatic corps[69]. Clearly, Favereau grasped Guillaume's conception of patriotism, and might have feared that it endangered Belgian neutrality. Although well-hidden in the more than one thousand pages of the book, in *L'Escaut depuis 1830* Guillaume had pleaded quite clearly for a more active neutrality and a stronger army[70].

The entry of Gontran de Lichtervelde to the diplomatic realm only a few years after Guillaume provides another example of the Congo generation's premature births. In his *Libre propos d'un Belge*, Gontran identified himself as the antagonist of those "timorous diplomats" who saw in the Congo Free State nothing but "stumbling blocks for our neutrality"[71].

64. See Jan Vandersmissen, *Koningen van de wereld. Leopold II en de aardrijkskundige beweging*, Leuven, 2009, p. 396-402. **65.** Émile de Borchgrave, "Un essai de marine et de colonisation belges au XVIIIe siècle : la compagnie d'Ostende", in *Revue générale*, LXXVI, December 1902, p. 904. **66.** Nel De Meûlenaere, *Belgen…*, p. 37-38. **67.** Jan Vandersmissen, *Koningen…*, p. 362 and 436-437. **68.** Paul Guillaume, *L'Escaut depuis 1830*, Brussels, 1902, 2 vol. **69.** AFDFA, Personnel File 143/399, "Paul Guillaume", Paul Guillaume to Paul de Favereau, September 1903; Note of Direction P; September 1903. **70.** Paul Guillaume, *L'Escaut…*, vol. 2, p. 137-139. **71.** Philopator, *Libres propos…*, p. 22.

By the time the First World War broke out, both Caraman and Gontran had died while Borchgrave was retired, but Guillaume was still there, heading the Belgian legation in Paris. Yet the generation of neutrality counted several survivors as well. While these men could no longer count on Arendt and Greindl, who retired the one not long after the other in 1912, they found in Van der Elst a once-convinced supporter of Leopold II’s colonial oeuvre who had gradually come to accept the precedence of neutrality over empire. According to Orts, Van der Elst had become imbued with the concern “not to upset any foreign government and did not like any vigour in the defence of our colonial interests either[72]. In the years before the First World War, Van der Elst was Albert’s key foreign policy adviser and convinced the King, and through him the government, to declare in 1912 that even in case of foreign invasion, Belgium would continue to respect its international statute of neutrality[73].

In a way, similar developments manifested themselves in the diplomatic corps of the leading European states. Studying four age groups of German diplomats which consecutively rose to power between 1871 and 1914, Sönke Neitzel perceives a gradual paradigm change in the dominant ideas about international relations. While the earliest generation was sceptical about the benefits of colonialism and imperialism, a later group of German diplomats embraced colonial politics as a means to enhance the national prestige. The group of diplomats which came to occupy key positions in the 1890s tended to combine imperialism with ideas about the ‘natural’ struggle between nations. According to Neitzel, “Social Darwinism, racial theories, and hypernationalism” intensified further in the youngest group of diplomats. Adding a comparative perspective, Neitzel argues that in the British and Austro-Hungarian diplomatic corps nationalist ideas only gained predominance after the turn of the century, from 1905 onwards among the former and on the eve of the First World War among the latter[74]. Neitzel’s assertion that such “irrational images of self and the other” pervaded all the different generations of French diplomats and Foreign Ministry officials active between 1871 and 1914 is partly contradicted by Peter Jackson and John Keiger. Whereas Jackson shows that in the decade before the First World War French senior diplomats abroad felt threatened by the Ministry’s more junior officials, who in 1907 managed to push through far-reaching internal reforms, Keiger explains that the resulting tensions between both groups originated in the divide between the nationalist outlook of the junior officials and the more sanguine, pragmatic outlook of the senior diplomats[75].

One could easily place Baron d’Anethan, defender of the ‘rational’ and very strict

72. SAB, I 184, “Papiers Orts”, n° 389, “Souvenirs de ma carrière”, p. 21. **73.** Emile Vandewoude, *Papiers du Baron Léon van der Elst*, Brussels, 1978, p. 7-9; Marie-Thérèse Bitsch, *La Belgique…*, p. 516. **74.** Sönke Neitzel, “Diplomatie der Generationen ? Kollektivbiographische Perspektiven auf die Internationalen Beziehungen, 1871-1914”, 296/1, in *Historische Zeitschrift*, 2013, p. 91-106. **75.** Peter Jackson, “Tradition and Adaptation : The Social Universe of the French Foreign Ministry in the Era of the First World War”, in *French History*, 24/2, 2010, p. 180; John Keiger quoted in Jackson, “Tradition and Adaptation”, p. 180-181. See also John Keiger, “Patriotism, politics and policy in the Foreign Ministry, 1880-1914”, in Robert Tombs (ed.), *Nationhood and Nationalism in France*, London, 1991, p. 258-259.

interpretation of neutrality, at the beginning of Neitzel's chronological spectrum, and his reluctant secretary Pierre Orts, advocate of more 'irrational' and nationalist foreign policy ideas, towards the end, closely followed by diplomats like the Counts Gontran and Baudouin de Lichtervelde, and Prince Pierre de Caraman Chimay. However, this should not conceal the essential difference with the German, British, Austro-Hungarian, and French cases, namely that before the outbreak of war neutrality remained the predominant paradigm in Belgian foreign policy making.

VI. Conclusion

In his reflections about the Belgian colonial party before 1905, Vincent Viaene almost casually remarks that "the imperial factor was… a key unspoken assumption behind the abandonment of neutrality after the First World War and the pursuit of a more active involvement in Great Power politics"[76]. Although Viaene does not prove his point, he is probably right. As suggested by the literature on Belgian foreign policy during and immediately after the war, the abandonment of neutrality did not happen without a struggle. This struggle included not only Belgian diplomats but also the country's politicians, journalists, and King. Towards the end of the war, the nationalists among them had managed to seize power. Their victory manifested itself most clearly in the thirst for territorial expansion manifested by the Belgian delegation, guided by Orts, at the Paris Peace Conference. Arguably, the failure to secure a greater Belgium at Versailles indirectly drove them towards a military alliance with France in 1920[77].

In this article, I have analysed the attitude of Belgian diplomats towards the military question in order to explain the roots of this new orientation in the country's foreign policy. Closely reading the writings of three members of the Belgian diplomatic corps and comparing their discourse with the words of their colleagues, I have argued that the current historiographical narrative on the diplomats' stance towards militarization is in need of revision. The Belgian diplomatic world was indeed no monolithic block of officials whose strict interpretation of neutrality led them to oppose any reinforcement of the military until the final years before the outbreak of war. Quite the contrary, at least from the mid-1890s onwards, several diplomats jettisoned the reticent attitude which their professional quality required of them and took an active part in the propaganda for personal conscription. While they shared many of the viewpoints of the (former) soldiers and doctrinaire Liberals who had instigated the campaigns, their ideas about the purposes of militarizing the nation were undeniably more ambitious.

Contrary to the more traditional 'militarists', these diplomats attached prime importance to the realization of Belgian economic and territorial expansion. They therefore supported their argument for the strengthening of the army by appealing to a concept of patriotism that connected the military question to the need for a larger Belgian empire. This way

76. Vincent Viaene, "King Leopold's Imperialism…", p. 759. **77.** See most recently Rik Coolsaet, *België*…, p. 207-241.

of understanding patriotism also harboured an elitist concern for proper guidance of the masses. Whereas changes in political culture after the 1893 extension of the franchise had promoted in members of the upper classes a certain distaste for domestic politics, the diplomats among them had found in Leopold II's imperialism a motivation to deal with the politicization of the populace. In their view, increases of the troop contingent through personal conscription were a means to an end. The army would not only remove the social threat emanating from the lower classes by instilling discipline in their most virile members, it would also nourish their love for Belgium and, much like the colony had done for diplomats, give them pride as the defenders of a strong empire.

Although having started from a less democratic perspective, expansionist diplomats shared these ideas with the budding movement of Belgian nationalists. As the First World War drew nearer, their increasing confidence in the strength of the Belgian nation led both groups to experience the statute of neutrality, by now overstretched by an ever more 'active' interpretation, as a curb on the country's potential. The outbreak of war made the time ripe for a coalition of nationalist diplomats and like-minded politicians and journalists. Together, they would eventually take over the reins of Belgian foreign policy and steer the country away from the damaged haven of neutrality.

Within the Foreign Ministry, the conflict of the generations had thus come to an end. While most junior diplomats had been ready to abandon neutrality even before the First World War had broken out, neutrality had been the creed that some senior diplomats had so internalized that they had felt the need to keep defending it throughout the First World War. In this article, I have devoted relatively little attention to how these 'neutralist' diplomats developed their ideas, perceived the country's interest, and acted on both. As the existing literature is not sufficiently clear about this, further research could reveal how, in the decades before the First World War, their views on Belgian diplomacy altered in relation to both internal and external events.

With this article, I have tried to provide additional insight into how the paradigms of diplomats about the nature of international relations changed under the influence of militarization, democratization, and imperialism. Especially for the period before the First World War, when politicians still largely left international affairs to the diplomats, the way these officials dealt with these processes can tell us much about how to interpret the construction and modification of a country's foreign policy aims.

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