

**AMERICAN STRATEGIC SERVICES PLANNING  
FOR BELGIUM, 1943**

BY

**J.E. HELMREICH**

*Professor of History, Allegheny College, Meadville*

In the dark period of World War II before Allied forces were capable of mounting a direct invasion of Nazi-controlled Europe, United States planners nevertheless charted targets for action which would support a future attack. The date of any landings in force was still indeterminate and distant. Initial efforts were therefore directed to ascertaining the extent of underground resistance and organization in occupied territories and the best manner of bolstering these for the day of invasion. This task naturally fell to the office best suited for such research and contact with underground resistance, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) headed by William J. Donovan. Within that office, the task was assigned to the Division of Psychological Warfare.

On 23 June 1943, the OSS Planning Group approved a Special Military Plan for Psychological Warfare in Belgium. This document was not highly specific in content. Its purpose was simply to establish parameters within which the Division of Psychological Warfare should operate in proposing targets and activities in Belgium and Luxembourg. Two goals were established. First was securing intelligence information regarding Belgium through cooperation with the British and with the Belgian government in exile in London. The second goal was exploration of possibilities for contacts with Belgian underground groups and coordination of their activities with Allied military

operations<sup>1</sup>.

The chief military consideration which drew the planning group's attention was Belgium's important system of water, air and railroad communications which had been incorporated into the German defense network. Economic concern focused on the industrial, coal, iron, steel, electrical, chemical, cement, and three ship building facilities which were feeding the German war effort. The political scene in Belgium was also reviewed, with mention given to the main political parties and resistance groups. The planners observed that

"[t]he king, prisoner of war, has lost some influence. The government in exile, comprised of certain cabinet members and deputies who escaped, is in London, has had differences with the king, is not popular in Belgium, is jealous of the political influence of, and has no control over, Belgian resistance groups, but maintains an intelligence network"<sup>2</sup>.

The OSS had staff in Britain but no operatives in Belgium. It was therefore dependent for information on the Belgian government in exile, the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), and the British Special Operations Executive (SOE). The SIS, or MI 6 as it was also known, had agents in Belgium. But because the SOE had agreed to work only through the Belgian government in exile, SIS operations in Belgium were limited.

In the opinion of the planning group, several factors called for improved American contact with the underground in Belgium: the importance of Belgian industrial and transportation targets, the capacity demonstrated by the Belgian population to organize resistance to German occupation forces, and the possibility of penetrating Germany via forced Belgian labor working in proximity to the Reich. But the

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1. Military History Institute, Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Special Military Plan for Psychological Warfare in Belgium, 23 June 1943, *William J. Donovan Collection*, (henceforth cited as *Donovan Collection*), Box 93. Col. A.H. Onthank of military intelligence was secretary to the Planning Group and probably played an extensive role in drafting the document.

2. *Ibid.*

Belgian government in exile lacked prestige and means of controlling underground groups. The planners therefore concluded that the OSS should continue to work with SIS and the Belgian government in exile. The Americans should also train, equip and employ agents who could contact the Belgian underground and encourage its activities. American strategic services were not bound by the SOE's agreement. They should retain their independence of action and freedom to meet with the Belgian resistance. It was further recommended that the United States establish its own intelligence service for Belgium. Strategic services officers in London should also draw up a detailed implementation plan for the actions contemplated.

In accordance with this last directive, the Psychological Warfare Staff drafted a "Special Study to Establish Targets For Psychological Warfare in Belgium and the Duchy of Luxembourg"<sup>3</sup>. Directed only to targets for the invasion phase of military activity, it endorsed the concept of creating a separate American intelligence service to operate in the two countries "when circumstances permit". Commitments which would prevent independent American contact with the Belgian underground should be avoided. Agents should be trained to collect secret intelligence and to explore the possibility of introducing personnel into Belgium who could establish relations with the underground. If this were achieved, steps might be taken to impede German use of Belgian industries and transport system. Belgian laborers in Germany could be coached how to weaken morale there, resistance to German administration in Belgium encouraged to create confusion, and plans made for physical sabotage when it would serve Allied invasion purposes.

The overall objective of the OSS was close collaboration with the Belgian underground. The Psychological Warfare Staff stated that if an Allied invasion were to move into Belgium, it would be necessary for the Commanding General "to have control of underground operation".

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3. This Special Study may be found in the *Donovan Collection*, Box 93.

During the invasion, the OSS task would be “to enlist full cooperation from the Belgian underground and then effectively to assist and control its activity”. The Americans saw need for their involvement because British aid to the Belgian resistance was “negligible” because of the SOE agreement which subordinated British action to the “direction and specific approval” of Belgian officials in London.

The Belgian underground, the authors of the study noted, was not coordinated in its organization and activities. Yet there were strong, effective groups with the will to take action. The writers estimated that over 7500 Belgians had already been executed for underground activity. The *Front de l'Indépendance* was making the best effort to coordinate underground activities. The Communists were also active and had the most ammunition. Inasmuch as the government in exile, the Roman Church, and most other political parties were staunchly anti-Communist, it was unlikely that close coordination could be established with this group. Gendarmes and police in various towns were organized and some were in contact with the government in London. The largest paramilitary movements were *La Légion Belge*, *Les Mousquetaires*, and *La Garde Blanche*, all of which included former army officers and reservists. The Catholic party had representation in the underground via *La Jeunesse Catholique* and the Socialists through *La Jeunesse Socialiste*. More than 130 underground newspapers were being published.

The planners believed the cooperation they desired could be best achieved through the strong Belgian Roman Catholic Church. They urged that the best personnel in their organization should be put on the problem. In an appendix which focused on the political, religious and underground situation in the two countries, the report noted that ninety percent of the population belonged to the Church and that Cardinal Van Roey, Archbishop of Malines and the Primate of Belgium, was a powerful and respected leader.

“While the Church has not sanctioned violence, it has, on a high plane, offered consistent and strong resistance to the invaders and to the Nazi

philosophy of life. There is no question but that the Church exercises a powerful influence over the underground groups and no one from the outside can hope to work successfully with the underground without the recognition of the Church"<sup>4</sup>.

Though the Americans considered it doubtful that the Church played an active role in the underground, they believed individual clergymen probably took part. Moreover, the underground activities of the Catholic party were protected by the Church, and the "Church stiffens the whole fabric of underground organization and resistance". Above all, the Church maintained representatives, especially of one strong group, in both London and the United States. This group, which operated in "utmost secrecy", had "powerful influence", the OSS believed. It was in communication with the group and wished the American relationship with it to be guarded with great care.

Good relations with the underground could in turn provide assistance with special intelligence targets. Prime among these was "*effective and continuous communication*". The OSS planned to furnish high frequency transmitting sets which would not be detectable by German direction finding apparatus. Knowledge was needed of the position, size, character, and condition of enemy armed forces. Information on German fortifications and troop movements was valued. It should include demolitions, minelaying, signals, location and movement of military, civil, and administrative leaders. The OSS wanted to know the plans and identities of quislings. Some of these they listed: Dr. Elias and Dr. Borms, both associated with Flemish groups; Léon Degrelle and Victor Matthys of the proto-Fascist Rexist party; a Delvo, leader of a German sponsored labor union; a Lambrechts, leader of an anti-Semitic league; Jef Van de Wiele of the pro-Nazi *De Vlag* movement; Gerard Romsee, Victor Leemans, and Emile de Winter, considered pro-Nazi government officials in Belgium; Prof. Kratzenburg, head of the Luxembourg Nazi party; Gustav Simon, *Gauleiter* of Luxembourg, and his assistant Siekmeyer; and three

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4. Special Study, *Donovan Collection*, Box 93.

others.

It was hoped that methods for OSS penetration of Germany might be found. Exported labor and professionals could set up passage for agents. "Captured quislings and Nazis under strong persuasion may reveal channels" for entry. Information on public morale in Belgium and Luxembourg and the nature of enemy propaganda could be provided.

Expectations held that collaboration with the underground would additionally assist the OSS in changing, at the time of invasion, the existing passive and active defensive resistance in the two countries to offensive activities. Propaganda could be used to prepare the people for this, but it needed to be well done. Belgians and Luxembourg citizens had long been subject to propaganda and were "all quite expert" in evaluating messages and rumors. Harsh coercion had not subdued their spirit, however. The OSS believed it could count on the population and groups "to respond to the stimulus of morale operations during the invasion campaign". Attitudes in the occupied countries remained good. The citizens of Luxembourg were "extremely friendly" to the British and Americans. If in Belgium there was some skepticism regarding the United Kingdom, there was "practically undiluted" confidence in the United States.

Possible content for propaganda aimed against the Nazi occupation forces was listed. It included reference to the inevitability of defeat as evidenced by Axis defeats in Russia and North Africa, resignation of Mussolini, exhaustion of German manpower and ineffectiveness of boy soldiers, failure of the U-boat campaign, breakdown of German industry and transportation as a result of Allied bombing, and the like. The fear of sabotage, poisoned water, and reprisals by the civilian population was also to be enhanced, "with a special brand of horror promised to the quislings".

The overall goal of close American collaboration with the Belgian underground should lead to achievement of specific operations

objectives, the staff wrote. The final pages of Appendix E listed these objectives in rapid order. Signal, guides, and interpreters should be provided for Allied forces. Enemy communications and transportation should be disrupted. Guerilla warfare against designated military and civil personnel and installations should break forth on invasion day. Enemy personnel and quislings should be restrained. The Americans should "assist, help, control and lead" all resistance cells. The effectiveness of the underground groups would be in "direct ratio to the quantity and character of information and inspiration they receive from OSS". The Americans should supply the groups with food, medicine, arms, and other needs. The resistance should endeavor to stop the activity of industrial establishments which contributed to the needs of the enemy: coal mines, oil refineries, bakeries, dairies, repair shops, armament plants.

The final special operations objective listed in this last appendix was identical with the second objective (after close cooperation between the OSS and the underground) of the main body of the report: "Liberate the Belgian King. This must be a most carefully planned coup de main project based on precise information from SI".

Liberate the king? The main body of the study explained why.

"King Leopold III ... is the outstanding personal and political leader of the Belgians. If the King could be persuaded to leave his military imprisonment at Brussels and to serve as the inspirational leader of an army of liberation, it would increase the effectiveness of OSS operations in support of the military plan"<sup>5</sup>.

The planners noted that though the idea of liberating the king from his "military imprisonment" near Brussels might seem "fantastic", such things had been done before. Despite the obvious difficulties and hazards, they recommended that the project be studied carefully; they thought that the liberation could be best effected through the cooperation of the Church.

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5. *Ibid.*

Appendix B of the study dealt with the political, religious, and underground situation. There the Psychological Warfare Staff noted that Leopold III was a strong leader. "Far from being a figurehead, the King lends authority and stability to the political life of the country". Belgium had followed the king in matters of foreign affairs, and the effectiveness of the Belgian democracy seemed more to strengthen than to weaken the constitutional monarch as a leader of his people. The men in the Belgian government in exile were outstanding politicians and industrialists. They had differed with the king, did "not have the full confidence of the Belgian people" and were unable to work effectively with the Belgian underground. The Allied nations would work with the official government in London, but "the pressing military problems of an invasion will require a more effective relationship with the people in Belgium than that now afforded by the government in exile". The report acknowledged that it would be necessary to obtain Leopold III's reaction to the plan. No mention was made, however, of the possibility that he might reject such "rescue" from his palace at Laeken even as he rejected his ministers' pleas to flee the country with them at the time of German invasion.

The special study prepared by United States Office of Strategic Services planners contained in its twenty pages a remarkable condensation of American views regarding Belgian politics, society, and morale. On 2 August 1943 the OSS Planning Group and Action Director of Strategic Services G. Edward Buxton gave it their approval. In accordance with directives of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, it was forwarded on 22 September directly to the theater commander for his information and "as suggestions for such general planning as he may desire"<sup>6</sup>. Though nominally sent to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the message in actuality was forwarded to the attention of the Chief of the Office of Strategic Services in Europe, Lt. Col. David K. Bruce. The last lines of the covering letter requested a detailed response

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6. Buxton to theater commander for attention of Lt. Col. Bruce, 22 Sept. 1943, *Donovan Collection*, Box 93.

regarding how the recommendations of the report were utilized.

To this date, no such written response has come to light; it is questionable whether any was ever made. The assumption of the OSS study when it was written was that an Allied invasion would take place on the Western coast of Europe, somewhere between the Netherlands and Southern France. The plan itself stated it was "*limited to targets for the invasion phase of military activity*"<sup>7</sup>. During the same summer months that the Psychological Warfare Staff was writing its study on Belgium, war operations planners were drafting an invasion project for the Cotentin peninsula in French Normandy, considerably to the south of Belgium. In the view of the Allies, the beaches of the low countries were not an appropriate locus for invasion because they could be too easily reinforced from Germany, were too soft for tracked and wheeled vehicles, and too subject to flooding. Calais, on the north coast of France, was too well defended<sup>8</sup>.

Once decision was reached on Normandy, the recommendations of the Belgian plan were automatically of less priority than they would have been had the site chosen lain closer to Belgium. That is not to say portions of the plan were not enacted later; the Belgian resistance clearly aided the Allied advance in the stages of the war which followed the invasion. The extent of United States contact with the Belgian underground in that phase must await some larger study. The choice of point of invasion may account for the delay between the date of the study's approval and its relay to Europe. It may also explain why Buxton in his cover letter indicated the study took the place of an implementation plan.

Neither Eisenhower nor Bruce were insensitive to matters of international relations. Eisenhower's later career is well known, and it should be remembered that Bruce would eventually serve as United

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7. Special Study, *Donovan Collection*, Box 93.

8. Stephen A. AMBROSE, *The Supreme Commander: The War Years of General Dwight D. Eisenhower*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1970, pp. 331-333.

States Under Secretary of State and as ambassador to France, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the United Kingdom. Whether they discussed the OSS plan is not known and perhaps doubtful. They might well have noted the difficulty of achieving "control" and cooperation by both Flemish and Walloon resistance groups, not to mention the Communists. The study acknowledged the linguistic split in Belgium, but said little regarding any implications this might have for Allied planning. How well any of the independently minded Belgians would have responded to the notion of being controlled or influenced by the Americans, especially if that control were not well masked, may also be questioned.

The Psychological Warfare Staff study recommended several objectives which could have impact on the future Belgian body politic. The most significant theme which emerges from the report, however, is the OSS planners' lack of confidence in the Belgian government in exile. Corollary to it was the belief that King Leopold could be the most effective leader in rallying the Belgian public and resistance against the Nazis.

These views were considerably altered by April 1944. By then, not only did the decision to invade via Normandy make the OSS plan in part irrelevant, but the United States moved closer to the Belgian government in exile and to following the British policy of collaborating with those officials. It is likely the Americans had too many other concerns demanding time and energy to do otherwise. After all, their British allies were more experienced in relations with Belgium and had opted to work through that government. The animosity of the government in exile, and especially of Prime Minister Hubert Pierlot and Foreign Minister Paul-Henri Spaak, toward the behavior of Leopold III in 1940 and subsequently was well known.

Moreover, in March of 1944 the British and Americans had quietly approached the Belgian government in London asking to purchase

scarce uranium which was available in the Belgian Congo<sup>9</sup>. The powers were highly dependent upon the cooperation of the Belgian cabinet for access to the ore necessary for their atomic weapon development program. The need for the support of the government ministers for the uranium deal, both then and after the liberation of Belgium, could be foreseen. The Americans may also have become aware that King Leopold III might be more a cause of division than a rallying point for Belgian unity against the Nazis<sup>10</sup>.

The OSS study clearly implied that the Americans should work with the Belgian resistance and Catholic Church. It was even suggested that a rescue of the king be planned, separate from and perhaps without the knowledge of the British and the Belgian government in exile. This was not what happened. Instead of sounding Leopold's view regarding a rescue effort, in April 1944 Eisenhower received instructions from the Department of State to "exercise great caution in dealing with any approach which you may receive from King Leopold or his emissaries during the period prior to the return of the Belgian Government to Belgian soil"<sup>11</sup>. Thereafter the Americans treated the royal question with kid gloves.

The fortunes of war bring many dreams, proposals, and twists of

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9. For information on these negotiations, see J.E. HELMREICH, "The Uranium Negotiations of 1944", in: *Le Congo belge durant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale*, Bruxelles, Académie royale des sciences d'outre-mer - Koninklijke Academie voor Overzeese Wetenschappen, 1983, pp. 253-283. Also see J.E. HELMREICH, *Gathering Rare Ores: The Diplomacy of Uranium Acquisition, 1943-1954*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1986.

10. This was the case by early 1945, when the United States Army anticipated liberation of the king; the Americans clearly wished to stay out of what was becoming a thorny Belgian internal problem. See J.E. HELMREICH, "United States Policy and the Belgian Royal Question (March-October 1945)", *Revue belge d'Histoire contemporaine-Belgisch tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, IX, 1978, 1-2, pp. 1-15.

11. Message to Eisenhower, 20 April 1944, United States Department of State Records, National Archives, European Advisory Commission, *Records of Philip E. Mosely*, Box 14, 200, Final draft of Combined Civil Affairs Committee Directive for Belgium.

fate. The possibilities of "if" history are endless and do not merit pursuit. Yet the implications for Belgian politics of a clandestine Allied liberation of Leopold III stimulate intriguing reflections.

## Les projets du "Strategic Services" américain concernant la Belgique, 1943

PAR  
J.E. HELMREICH

### Résumé

Durant l'été de 1943, l'U.S. Office of Strategic Services préparait un projet militaire spécial de guerre psychologique, et élaborait une étude spéciale en vue d'établir des groupes cibles dans cette guerre psychologique en Belgique et dans le Grand-Duché du Luxembourg.

Ses rapports décrivaient le moral des citoyens belges et luxembourgeois, identifiaient les groupes de résistants et de collaborateurs, et arrivaient à la conclusion que le contrôle des mouvements clandestins s'effectuerait le mieux par le biais de l'église catholique, qui avait une position très forte.

Il se manifestait un manque de confiance évident dans le gouvernement belge en exil, et la conviction régnait que Léopold III pourrait bien être le point de ralliement par excellence pour la résistance belge. Cela fit envisager la possibilité d'organiser une mission secrète pour "libérer" le Roi.

D'autres objectifs incluaient l'établissement d'un réseau d'intelligences américain, indépendant de celui des Britanniques, la mise en place de signaux et de guides, le sabotage des lignes d'information ennemies et l'organisation d'actions de guérilla au jour de l'invasion.

Nous manquons d'information à propos de la réalisation effective de ces plans. Les projets visaient uniquement la phase d'invasion de l'action militaire. Lorsque le choix des lieux d'invasion des Alliés fut

porté sur les plages au sud du littoral belge, ces plans devenaient moins pertinents.

Et en ce qui concerne Léopold III, les Américains concluaient vite de se tenir loin des complications de la question royale.

## De plannen van de Amerikaanse "Strategic Services" inzake België, 1943

DOOR

J.E. HELMREICH

Samenvatting

Tijdens de zomer van 1943 bereidde het U.S. Office of Strategic Services een speciaal militair plan voor psychologische oorlogsvoering voor, en een speciale studie om doelwitten voor psychologische oorlogsvoering vast te stellen in België en het Groothertogdom Luxemburg.

Deze rapporten beschreven het moreel van de Belgische en Luxemburgse burgers, ze identificeerden weerstandsgroepen en collaborateurs met de Duitsers, en ze suggereerden dat controle over de ondergrondse beweging het best bereikt kon worden via de Rooms-katholieke kerk, die zich in een zeer sterke positie bevond.

Er was een duidelijk gebrek aan vertrouwen in de uitgeweken Belgische regering, en tevens bestond er een sterke overtuiging dat Leopold III wel eens de beste wervingsfactor voor de Belgische weerstand kon zijn. Om die reden werd de mogelijkheid overwogen een geheime missie te creëren met als doel de koning te "bevrijden". Andere doelen omvatten de oprichting van een Amerikaans inlichtingensysteem in België, onafhankelijk van dat van de Britten, het plaatsen van signalen en gidsen, het onderbreken van vijandige verbindingen, en guerilla akties op de dag van de invasie.

Er is geen informatie voorhanden die aangeeft of, en in welke mate de

plannen uitgevoerd werden.

De projecten waren enkel ontworpen voor de invasiefase van de militaire aktie. Toen de stranden ten zuiden van de Belgische kust werden uitgekozen voor de landing van de geallieerden, werden deze plannen minder toepasselijk.

En wat Leopold III betreft, de Amerikanen besloten al vlug dat ze niet wensten verwickeld te worden in de moeilijke koningskwestie.