

BELGIUM AND THE COLD WAR: ACTOR, TARGET, SITE

- *Giles Scott-Smith* -

On 4 July 1989, Colonel Nikolai Skuridin took off in a MiG-23 from Bagicz air force base in western Poland for a routine training flight. During take-off, the engine's afterburner failed. Anticipating an inevitable crash, Skuridin ejected at an altitude of 500 feet. To what must have been his enormous surprise, the aircraft continued, pilotless, in a westerly direction across East and then West Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium. F-15s from Soesterberg air base intercepted the MiG but waited for it to pass over the North Sea before acting – however, the aircraft gradually turned south of its own accord, and after travelling 900 kilometres it eventually crashed into a house in Bellegem, near Kortrijk, killing 18-year-old Wim Delaere. The following day Mikhail Gorbachev responded: "I am sorry about what happened. The Belgians have been made aware of the reasons and we expressed our regret." Mark Eyskens, the Belgian Foreign Minister, called in the Soviet Ambassador, Feliks P. Bogdanov, for an explanation on 6 July. Eyskens complained about the lack of warning from the Soviet side, including on what kind of armaments the aircraft was carrying. This minor diplomatic incident culminated in USSR paying Belgium compensation to the amount of \$685,000.¹

I. Introduction

This episode is a symbolic starting point for reflecting on the study of Belgium and the Cold War. This article will mix personal reflections with selected historiographical references and primary sources to introduce an alternative framework for studying Belgium, Belgians and Belgian society during the Cold War. It also draws on certain historiographical trends in the Netherlands as a form of comparison. Traditional historiography has largely focused on the anchoring of Belgium in the Western alliance, the contribution of major statesmen towards realising Western and European goals, and the role of the Communist party in challenging the previous two and being treated as a ‘fifth column’. Yet according to many of these perspectives, the Cold War was not decisive for shaping ‘Belgium’. Mark van den Wijngaert and Lieve Beullens in *Oost West West Best*, the seminal text on the Belgian Cold War experience, did argue that the bipolar Cold War contest determined the direction and nature of Belgian foreign and defence policy as well as its domestic political scene, yet they still concluded the following: “De Koude Oorlog had maar een beperkt effect op de Belgische economie en had evenmin een doorslaggevende invloed op de sociale politiek in ons land.”² Like Skuridin’s MiG, for most Belgians the Cold War apparently fell out of the sky onto their unsuspecting nation, caused some minor damage, and then disappeared, leaving few traces behind. But just as Skuridin’s MiG did ultimately kill a Belgian citizen, so too did the Cold War affect Belgium in more ways than have seemed apparent to the orthodox viewpoint. The death of Wim Delaere is an important reminder that the Cold War had its victims, its tragedies, its winners and its losers, and its unexpected twists of fate, at every level of society. In addition to the political and economic impact of the conflict, it is the social and cultural side to the Cold War

that deserves more attention. As this special issue clearly demonstrates from various perspectives, the Cold War acted as a kind of force field that shaped thinking on Belgium as an international actor, as a nation-state, as a society – and thinking on Belgians as citizens, with obligations, loyalties, and adversaries – as it did in similar ways across all of Europe. Going in this direction can bring Belgium within range not only of wayward MiGs, but also of the latest trends within Cold War studies more broadly.

This does not mean that everything that occurred between 1947-1989 has equal significance as a Cold War phenomenon. This issue is best solved by Rana Mitter and Patrick Major’s distinction between Cold War culture and the cultural Cold War. Whereas the former represents cultural production that took place during the recognised Cold War period, and could be linked to the Cold War only through the wider socio-political context of the ideological struggle, the cultural Cold War signifies culture that was produced or applied to directly engage with that ideological struggle. Whereas with the former the Cold War is context, with the latter the Cold War is cause.³ They are equally valid research terrains, and this article makes use of both.

In 2015-2016 I teamed up with three Belgian colleagues to produce two special issues of the journal *Dutch Crossing* that aimed to reconceptualise the meaning of the Cold War as a subject of study for the Benelux nations. In these issues’ introductions we emphasised the following: that Cold War studies in the Benelux up till then had been largely traditional diplomatic and political studies, that they tended to focus on the pro-US stance of each nation (the ‘loyal ally’ thesis), and that they had sought to overcome the ‘small state’ phobia by claiming influence beyond their apparently limited status (as Obama liked to say, ‘punching

1. “Belgians Protest to Soviets Over Crash of Derelict MiG”, *New York Times*, 6 July 1989, Section A, p. 3. TOM LANOYE used this incident for his novella *Heldere Hemel*, Amsterdam, 2012.

2. MARK VAN DEN WIJNGAERT & LIEVE BEULLENS (eds.), *Oost West West Best : België onder de Koude Oorlog (1947-1989)*, Brussel, 1997, 261-262.

3. See RANA MITTER & PATRICK MAJOR (eds.), *Across the Blocs : Cold War Cultural and Social History*, London, 2004.

above their weight'). There was a great need to look beyond the confines of foreign ministries and take in the wider field of diplomacy as a space where a multitude of actors were engaged, both officially and unofficially.⁴ The fact that CegeSoma, the Belgian centre of expertise for the history of 20th century conflicts, saw it as necessary and important to organise a new event on 'Belgium and the Cold War' in 2022 is evidence that what we were discussing back then is still valid. The *Dutch Crossing* issues also provided some inspiration for a more wide-ranging evaluation of Belgian Cold War historiography published by CegeSoma researcher Michael Auwers later that year.⁵ Taking the *Dutch Crossing* project and Auwers' contribution in *BTNG* as foundation, this article presents a three-layered interpretation of Belgium in/and the Cold War. It continues the exploration of the social-cultural dimensions of the conflict by concentrating on Belgium as actor, as target, and as site. These categories enable a reconsideration of Belgium and Belgians in the Cold War by moving outside of Auwers' use of 'foreign policy elites', 'ideology', 'technology', and 'anti-communist networks', raising questions about levels of influence and agency in the process.

II. Belgium as Actor

The first layer concerns Belgium as Actor. This is in many ways the most traditional, since it must include the 'small state, big diplomats' line of thinking that elevates key (male) figures such as Paul-Henri Spaak and Pierre Harmel, Luxembourg's Joseph Bech, and the Netherlands' Joseph Luns and Max van den Stoel beyond national pol-

itics and into the realm of international 'movers and shakers'. This is the field that has engaged the most with the 'small state' designation, for instance through research into the role of international mediator, as Vincent Dujardin has done regarding Belgium and East-West relations during Détente.⁶ Auwers has provided an excellent overview of the relevant literature on the Belgian foreign policy elite and there is no need to repeat that here.⁷ It is, however, an important detail that the monarchy continued to play an over-sized role in Belgian Cold War politics. This led to the continuation of traditions of monarchs who "resorted to a wide network of semi-official and informal agents to further the domestic and foreign interests of dynasty and state."⁸ Although this comment applied to the nineteenth century, recent evidence on Cold War Belgium, and particularly the Congo, point to its relevance for the twentieth as well.⁹ Here it is important to refer to New Diplomatic History perspectives, which explore the temporal, spatial, and behavioural dimensions of diplomacy and diplomats by drawing on social scientific methodologies to open up the field via innovative approaches.¹⁰ In an important review essay on New Diplomatic History and its application to Belgium, Auwers and Houssine Alloul emphasised two "epistemological strands":

One broadens the field socially, as it devotes more attention to those individuals often bypassed in more orthodox surveys of diplomatic interactions. The other revises and re-visualizes the classical diplomat and interstate diplomacy on the behavioral plain, gauging how diplomatic practices as well as the diplomat's disparate roles and social milieus were transformed in an increasingly global context.¹¹

4. See KIM CHRISTIAENS, FRANK GERITS, IDESBALD GODEERIS & GILES SCOTT-SMITH (eds.), Special Issue: The Low Countries and Eastern Europe during the Cold War, *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies* 39/3, 2015; IDEM (eds.), Special Issue: The Benelux and the Cold War: Re-interpreting West-West Relations, *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies* 40/1, 2016.

5. MICHAEL AUWERS, "Koele minnaars van de Koude Oorlog: De Belgische historici en het Oost-Westconflict na de Tweede Wereldoorlog", *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* (henceforth *BTNG*), 52/3, 2022, 34-64.

6. VINCENT DUJARDIN, "Go-Between: Belgium and Détente, 1961-73," *Cold War History* 7/1, 2007, 95-116.

7. AUWERS, "Koele minnaars", 36-43.

8. HOUSSINE ALLOUL & MICHAEL AUWERS, "What is (New in) New Diplomatic History?," *BTNG*, 48/4, 2018, 118.

9. See for instance EMMANUEL GERARD & BRUCE KUKLICK, *Death in the Congo: Murdering Patrice Lumumba*, Cambridge MA, 2015.

10. See GILES SCOTT-SMITH, "Introduction: Private Diplomacy, Making the Citizen Visible", *New Global Studies* 8, 2014, 1-7.

11. ALLOUL & AUWERS, "What is (New)," 114-115.

Expanding the field in this way changes our understanding of who are relevant subjects when studying diplomatic relations. This is important to move beyond orthodox interpretations of Belgium as a small state, for instance. IR definitions of small states often make use of a limited understanding of power in the international realm, ignoring the domestic dimension. Attempts by international historians to address this – such as the Crump-Erlandsson focus on ‘margins of manoeuvre’ – still tend to stick with the basic assumption of small states as unitary actors.¹² Secondly, and following on from this, we need to re-assess what is meant by ‘Belgium’. Actorness has long been defined along lines of gender and race, and challenging this opens up new vistas on the Cold War experience. It is always problematic to refer to an entire nation in simple general terms, as if what is said applies to everyone. Who speaks for Belgium, and in what way, with what effect? How did the traumatic experience of the Second World War affect the understanding of Belgium as a nation state and as a society, especially as the country entered a period of bipolar tension and then the traumas of decolonisation soon afterwards?¹³ Do the many Cold War Belgians add up to one narrative? Should they, even? These kinds of questions complicate standard notions of actorness in international history.

Here it is useful to compare with research on the Dutch experience of the Cold War. Between 1992 and 2004 the *Stichting Maatschappij en Krijgsmacht* (formerly *Stichting Volk en Verdediging*) led the way in producing three books on the

Cold War years in the Netherlands, focusing on the influence of Cold War defence policies, military-civilian relations and mentalities on wider society. This included chapters on anti-nuclear movements and propaganda activities that up till then had not received much attention.¹⁴ Although there is no equivalent to the Van der Wijngaert – Beullens volume in Dutch Cold War historiography, these three volumes collectively form a useful benchmark. In particular, they introduce a range of state and non-state actors that were influential in shaping discourse and social relations during the Cold War. In this context, particular attention should be given to the role of intelligence services. Overt and covert attempts to influence and shape public opinion along ideological lines were of course constant and widespread. Analysing the entanglement of state-private networks has been a key area of so-called ‘new Cold War history’ in the United States and the UK, in an effort to unravel the extent to which ideological causes penetrated everyday society, who was really working for whom, and to what end. Alleged ‘free agents’ were often working hand in glove with agencies of the state, clouding the impression of a motivated citizenry acting of its own accord, and official and unofficial interests and identities merged within a shared cause and conception of reality.¹⁵ Histories of the Dutch intelligence services have gradually brought some of this into focus, ranging from the ‘insider’ accounts of Dick van Engelen to the freelance investigations of Frans Kluiters and the pursuit of transparency by Cees Wiebes and Bob de Graaff, who have consistently challenged the state’s abil-

12. LAURIEN CRUMP & SUSANNA ERLANDSSON (eds.), *Margins for Manoeuvre in Cold War Europe: The Influence of Smaller Powers*, Abingdon, 2020.

13. The public diplomacy of the Belgian state is one realm that has been explored in recent years by the fourth member of our *Dutch Crossing* editorial team. See FRANK GERITS, “‘Défendre l’oeuvre que nous réalisons en Afrique’: Belgian Public Diplomacy and the Global Cold War (1945-1966)”, *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies* 40/1, 2016, 68-80; FRANK GERITS, “Americanising the Belgian Civilising Mission (1941-1961): The Belgian Information Centre in New York and the Campaign to cast the Belgian Civilising Mission as part of the Point IV Programme”, in LAURIEN CRUMP & SUSANNA ERLANDSSON (eds.), *Margins for Manoeuvre*, 130-146.

14. J. HOFFENAAR & G. TEITLER (eds.), *De koude oorlog. Maatschappij en krijgsmacht in de jaren '50*, Den Haag, 1992; B. SCHOENMAKER & J.A.M.M. JANSSEN (eds.), *In De Schaduw van de Muur: Maatschappij en krijgsmacht rond 1960*, Den Haag, 1997; J. HOFFENAAR, J. VAN DER MEULEN, & R. DE WINTER (eds.), *Confrontatie en Ontspanning: Maatschappij en krijgsmacht in de Koude oorlog 1966-1989* Den Haag, 2004.

15. W. SCOTT LUCAS, “Mobilizing Culture: The State-Private Network and the CIA in the Early Cold War”, in DALE CARTER & ROBIN CLIFTON (eds.), *War and Cold War in American Foreign Policy 1942-1962*, Basingstoke, 2002, 83-107.

ity to withhold material from declassification. Frits Hoekstra's *In Dienst van de BVD* from 2004 also marked an important step towards agent memoirs, something familiar in the US but much less so in Europe. Beatrice de Graaf broke new ground in her studies of peace movements and terrorists in the context of East-West confrontation.¹⁶ Historians such as Floribert Baudet and myself have delved further into the state-private networks that orchestrated information campaigns from the 1940s to the 1980s to promote social resilience among the Dutch population, using communism as a threat to strengthen the widespread promotion of 'Western values'.¹⁷ A key ally in this Cold War campaign was the Netherlands Atlantic Committee, part of the Atlantic Treaty Association's network of national institutions promoting the NATO cause. The media was a vital player in this context, and we have seen important studies over the past 25 years that have brought into focus the role of specific newspapers as 'information filters' and the overt and covert activities of journalists as campaigners, propagandists, talent spotters, and go-betweens.¹⁸ We have also seen interesting 'moral equivalence' works like Martin Bossenbroek's *Fout in de Koude Oorlog*, that matches left-wing film-maker Joris Ivens with right-wing foreign minister and NATO chief Joseph Luns to claim that both were to blame (or at the least, both were held captive by their respective Cold

War ideological dogmatisms) for the decisions and standpoints that they took.¹⁹

In short, research on the role of the intelligence services, the socio-political dimensions of the Cold War, and the state-private networks that permeated those dimensions has raised questions about simplistic notions of actorness in Cold War Netherlands. This was carried out without a major official declassification of intelligence archives and without either a state-sanctioned investigation into security activities such as the PET Commission in Denmark and similar work in Germany, or a broader evaluation of how the Cold War was used to shape national consciousness as in neutral Switzerland.²⁰ In late 2022 the Dutch Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) released around 71,000 personal files to the National Archives in The Hague, covering individuals who had been the subject of some form of surveillance during the period 1945 to 1998, a major step towards opening up the activities of the service for public scrutiny.²¹ Although the Dutch historiography points to a substantial body of research that is of high quality, it still largely takes the Cold War dynamics for granted. It was an ideological contest, communism and the USSR represented an imminent threat, and this was simply what needed to be done. There is no talk of a 'security state' in Dutch Cold War historiography.²² Nevertheless, it does offer some

16. See BEATRICE DE GRAAF, *Over de muur: De DDR, de Nederlandse kerken en de vredesbeweging*, Amsterdam, 2004.

17. FLORIBERT BAUDET, *Het Vierde Wapen: Voorlichting, Propaganda en Volksveerbaarheid 1944-1953*, Amsterdam, 2013);

GILES SCOTT-SMITH, *Western Anticommunism and the Interdoc Network: Cold War Internationale*, Basingstoke, 2012.

18. Whereas the Dutch media is easily searchable via Delpher, the Begicapress site (<https://www.belgicapress.be/?lang=EN#>) covers only up to 1950, with only *Le Soir* (neutral/Liberal) available up to 1970 and *Le Drapeau Rouge* (communist) up to 1966. For *Gazet van Antwerpen*, one of the most widely read Flemish dailies, the archive is limited to subscribers (<http://archieff.gva.be/index.do>).

19. MARTIN BOSSENBROEK, *Fout in de Koude Oorlog: Nederland in Tweestrijd, 1945-1989*, Amsterdam, 2016.

20. See for instance JAKOB TANNER, "Switzerland and the Cold War: A Neutral Country between the 'American Way of Life' and 'Geistige Landesverteidigung'", in JOY CHARNLEY & MALCOLM PENDER (eds.), *Occasional Papers in Swiss Studies* 2, Bern, 1999, 113-128; ARIANE KNUSEL, "Swiss Counterintelligence and Chinese Espionage in the Cold War", *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22, 2020, 4-31; RASMUS MARIAGER, *PET: Historien om Politiets Efterretningstjeneste fra den kolde krig til krigen mod terror*, Copenhagen, 2009. In Germany, historians Jost Dülffer, Klaus-Dietmar Henke, Wolfgang Krieger, and Rolf-Dieter Müller were given the task of writing the official history of the Bundesarchivdienst (BND). Between 2016 and 2022 14 volumes were published based on exclusive access to the service archives. See http://www.uhk-bnd.de/?page_id=340.

21. See <https://www.nationaalarchieff.nl/onderzoeken/zoekhulpen/persoonsdossiers-nederlandse-veiligheidsdiensten-bnv-cvd-en-bvd-1945-1998>.

22. This is also evident in the very measured responses of certain Dutch historians to the release of the personal files. See Bart Funnekotter and Joep Dohmen, 'Bij 'verdachte journalisten' werd door geheime dienst BVD een kanttekening geplaatst: 'Heftige linkse sympathieën', *NRC Handelsblad*, 31 March 2023; ELENI BRAAT & BEN DE JONG, 'Het echte belang van de BVD-dossiers', *Historiek*, 12 December 2023, <https://historiek.net/het-echte-belang-van-de-bvd-dossiers/160893/>.

inspiration for reconceptualising Belgium as Actor in the Cold War. Recent work from the Belgian Intelligence Studies Centre, particularly through its *Cahiers d'études des services du renseignement*, has laid down an institutional framework for research on the intelligence services.²³ Delving into security relations with the United States are fundamental for such a re-assessment. In 2016, in a talk entitled 'Is it safe now? Reflections on research into Cold War anti-communism' given at a conference on the Cold War organised by the Belgian Intelligence Studies Centre, I called for a 'de-centering' of the United States in Cold War historiography: "Local anti-communist forces in for instance Western Europe interacted with, followed, manipulated, undermined and/or rejected US designs on how anti-communism should be practiced in their respective societies."²⁴ This continues to be an issue of importance – what levels of autonomy were there? Did every anti-communist activity have American fingerprints? The last in-depth study of the murder of communist member of parliament Julien Lahaut, probably the most notorious act of Cold War political violence that took place in Belgium itself, revealed no such US influence.²⁵

Two further areas of activity in the Netherlands that could offer new avenues for research in Belgium are the following. Firstly, at the elite level, the ground-breaking Diplomatic Witnesses oral history project on Dutch diplomacy covering the late Cold War and the immediate years thereafter. This project was completed by the Huygens Institute in 2023 with funding and full cooperation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Modelled on the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training in

Washington DC and the London-based Commonwealth Oral History Project run by Sue Onslow, the project recreates 'diplomatic thinking' and on-the-ground accounts through interviews with practitioners involved in East-West affairs in the 1980s and 1990s.²⁶ Secondly, at the grassroots level, the field of life writing. Whereas biography is connected to 'movers and shakers', life writing is largely coming out of debates on 'who speaks in history?' and expresses a strong gender component. So far it has largely been used to give voice and identity to those who lived with colonialism and its after-effects, but it could easily be applied to cover other social groups to piece together the personal and the political and investigate how the effects of decolonisation and the Cold War were closely intertwined.²⁷

III. Belgium as Target

The second layer concerns Belgium as Target. This refers not simply to the threat of nuclear weapons, but to the information and influence campaigns conducted predominantly by the superpowers on Belgian public life in general and specific sectors of society – politicians, trade unions, student organisations, religious institutions, and so on. Sonja Grossman's work on Soviet Friendship Societies active across Western Europe is a good example of research that aims to upgrade our appreciation of these societies that acted not just as cultural diplomacy outlets but also channels of informal diplomatic contact.²⁸ The restrictions on Soviet-era archives have prevented much further progress, but there is enough material

23. See also KENNETH LASOEN, *Geheim België: Geschiedenis van de inlichtingendiensten, 1830-2020*, Tielt, 2020.

24. GILES SCOTT-SMITH, "Is It Safe Now?" Reflections on Research into Cold War Anti-Communism", CegeSoma, 22 March 2016.

25. EMMANUEL GERARD, WIDUKIND DE RIDDER, & FRANÇOISE MULLER (eds.), *Wie heeft Lahaut vermoord? De koude oorlog in België*, Leuven, 2015.

26. Diplomatieke Getuigenissen/Diplomatic Witnesses, <https://diplomatieke-getuigenissen.huygens.knaw.nl/>. See also ADST's online archive at <https://adst.org/oral-history/> and the Commonwealth archive at <https://commonwealthorallhistories.org>

27. See for instance LONNEKE GEERLINGS, "W.E.B. Du Bois at Ons Suriname: Amsterdam, transnational networks and Dutch anti-colonial activism in the late 1950s", in BABS BOTER, MARLEEN RENSEN & GILES SCOTT-SMITH (eds.), *Unhinging the National Framework: Perspectives on Transnational Lives*, Amsterdam, 2020, 81-98.

28. SONJA GROSSMANN, "Dealing with 'Friends': Soviet Friendship Societies in Western Europe as a Challenge for Western Diplomacy", in SIMO MIKKONEN & PIA KOIVUNEN (eds.), *Beyond the Divide: Entangled Histories of Cold War Europe*, New York, 2015, 196-217. For an early assessment see LOUIS NEMZER, "The Soviet Friendship Societies", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 13/2, 1949, 265-284.

available outside of Russia to piece together Soviet / Warsaw Pact information activities, as shown by the exemplary work of Idesbald Godeeris.²⁹ Belgian participation in rival front organisations such as the World Federation of Democratic Youth and the World Assembly of Youth, or the International Organisation of Journalists and the International Federation of Journalists, for instance, might be worth exploring. My own research into American exchange programmes has shown how it is possible to investigate not simply the influence of the United States on individual participants, but also how US public diplomacy was able to coordinate across various state-private initiatives – the State Department’s Foreign Leader Program, the Fulbright Program, and various philanthropic programmes of Ford and Rockefeller in particular – to bring to light how university departments, think tanks and other professional institutions were influenced over time.³⁰ Frank Gerits has covered some of the activities of the United States Information Service in Belgium, but it would be worth going further to trace the contribution of the Fulbright Program, with over 4000 participants since 1948, on the development of American Studies and other fields of activity in Belgian universities.³¹ As Auwers remarks, the impact of major US foundations such as Ford and Rockefeller on the Belgian academic/scientific landscape has so far also not been explored.³² And this is just the tip of the iceberg – the 1958 annual report on international exchanges by the US embassy indicated assistance for numerous private exchanges: American Women’s Club, John Hay Whitney Award,

Kellogg Scholarship, Esso Standard Scholarship, American Home Economics Association, General Motors Scholarship, Rotary International Scholarship, NYU Institute of Comparative Law Scholarships. How did these youth, academic, professional, even military exchanges contribute to the shaping of Belgian thinking and behaviour at the micro but perhaps also at the macro level? How did they function as channels of knowledge transfer? In what ways did they act as conduits of Americanisation? Pierre Harmel was a Leader Program grantee in 1956, after which he wrote *Scientific Research and the Development of the University* based on research gathered during that visit. In 1958 he became Minister of Cultural Affairs (including overseeing state radio and tv services). In what ways did the 1956 visit contribute to his developing worldview? This has so far only been covered briefly in Vincent Dujardin’s biography of Harmel, and its context and consequences remain vague.³³ These kinds of explorations, to ascertain the effects of superpower soft power across Belgian society via the trajectories of individual careers, can reveal a lot about the subtleties of influence and impact over time.

IV. Belgium as Site

This brings up the third layer, Belgium as Site. In the Introductions to our *Dutch Crossing* issues some years ago we wrote the following:

the Low Countries certainly deserve their place in Cold War historiography, not as a pri-

29. IDESBALD GODEERIS, *Spioneren voor het communisme: Belgische prominenten en Poolse geheim agenten* (Leuven, 2013).

30. Published research on the Fulbright Program in Belgium remains limited, although there are studies of the development of American Studies. See ANAIS MAES, *Aan weerszijden van de Atlantische Oceaan: politiek-culturele betrekkingen tussen de Verenigde Staten en België tijdens de eerste fase van de Koude Oorlog (1945-1963) met een case-study over de United States Educational Foundation in Belgium (Fulbright programma)*, Masters thesis, VUB, 2005; SERGE JAUMAIN & FREDERIC LOUVAULT, “(Re)structuring American Studies in Belgium”, *Ideas/Idées d’Amérique*, 17, 2021. There are several studies of US exchange programmes in the Netherlands, see GILES SCOTT-SMITH, “The Fulbright Program in the Netherlands: An Example of Science Diplomacy”, in JEROEN VAN DONGEN (ed.), *Cold War Science and the Transatlantic Circulation of Knowledge*, Leiden, 2015, 128-154; GILES SCOTT-SMITH, *Networks of Empire: The US State Department’s Foreign Leader Program in The Netherlands, Britain, and France 1950-1970*, Brussels, 2008; JAN RUPP, *Van Oude en Nieuwe Universiteiten: De Verdinging van Duitse door Amerikaanse Invloeden op de Wetenschapsbeoefening en het Hoger Onderwijs in Nederland 1945-1995*, Den Haag, 1997.

31. See FRANK GERITS, “Taking Off the Soft Power Lens: The United States Information Service in Cold War Belgium (1950-1958)”, *Journal of Belgian History*, 42/4, 2012, 10-49.

32. AUWERS, “Koele minnaars”, 45.

33. See VINCENT DUJARDIN, *Pierre Harmel* (Brussels, 2004, 371-373).

mus inter pares, but definitely as an integral part of a wider transnational phenomenon with global but also often very local aspirations and dimensions.³⁴

The Benelux as a site of the Cold War was characterised by a host of commonalities: the long-term impact of decolonisation, the subtle but real effects of the Cold War on everyday life and domestic policies, the constant need to renegotiate positions within the transatlantic framework. From these perspectives, the Benelux nations are not so much *gidslanden* as *schakellanden* – connecting nations, significant nodes of transit and traffic that are useful for, and that make use of, the intentions and interests of others, be they in the West, South or East.³⁵

Cold War studies of small states have begun to bring out how ‘small’ is a simplistic indication if one wants to identify how bipolar dynamics and spheres of influence impacted at all levels of society. Elidor Méhilli has shown, through the perspective of Albania, how Soviet-bloc transnational connections of expertise interacted with local perceptions of progress and state-building. Theodora Dragostinova has delved into the uses of culture for giving meaning and importance in 1980s Bulgaria.³⁶ And as Gyorgy Péteri put forward some years ago, it is more useful to think of a ‘Nylon Curtain’ rather than an ‘Iron Curtain’ for “giving room to Eastern European agency, broadening the scope of actors involved, and shifting narratives away from questions of power to questions of exchange and encounter.”³⁷

Using this and similar work as inspiration, Belgium as Site could focus in on two particular aspects. Firstly, the local dimensions to transnational activity that took place within Belgium itself. There has been good work done on the 1958 World Expo in Brussels, much of it focusing on the favourable portrayal of Belgian colonialism in the Congo.³⁸ Then there is the wider diplomatic status of Brussels as transnational metropolis. In 2015 Idesbald Goddeeris rightly cautioned reading too much into Brussels as a priority site for either overt or covert diplomatic activities, and new archival research published in this theme issue has allowed him to strengthen that argument.³⁹ Nevertheless, the arrival of the NATO headquarters in 1966, added to the gradual expansion of European institutions and competences, must have left a traceable impact of intellectual internationalisation on the wider circles of Belgian knowledge industries – universities, think tanks, the media – and thus also on the self-perception of Belgium as actor (and indeed target) in the Cold War. Then there is the specifically diplomatic environment. A few years ago I ran a project with Duco Hellema to portray the wider roles, interactions and webs of influence of the US embassy in The Hague, at the moment when it relocated out of the city centre, to resituate our understanding of US diplomacy as an embedded, ever-present element not only of the Dutch body politic but also of society in general. The aim was to bring into focus the extent to which the embassy operated as a hegemonic institution at the local and national levels, as an outpost of US power situated within a close ally.⁴⁰

34. KIM CHRISTIAENS, FRANK GERITS, IDESBALD GODEERIS & GILES SCOTT-SMITH (eds.), *The Low Countries and Eastern Europe during the Cold War*, Introduction, 195.

35. KIM CHRISTIAENS, FRANK GERITS, IDESBALD GODEERIS & GILES SCOTT-SMITH (eds.), *The Benelux and the Cold War: Re-interpreting West-West Relations*, Introduction, 7.

36. ELIDOR MÉHILLI, “Socialist Encounters: Albania and the Transnational Eastern Bloc in the 1950s”, in PATRYCK BABIRACKI & KENYON ZIMMER (eds.), *Cold War Crossings: International Travel and Exchange across the Soviet Bloc, 1940s-1960s*, College Station, 2014, 107-133; THEODORA DRAGOSTINOVA, *The Cold War from the Margins: A Small Socialist State on the Global Cultural Scene*, Ithaca, 2021.

37. GYORGY PÉTERI (ed.), *Nylon Curtain. Transnational and Transsystemic Tendencies in the Cultural Life of State-Socialist Russia and East-Central Europe*, Trondheim, 2006.

38. MATTHEW STANARD, “‘Bilan du monde pour un monde plus déshumanisé’: The 1958 Brussels World’s Fair and Belgian Perceptions of the Congo”, *European History Quarterly*, 35/2, 2005, 267–298.

39. IDESBALD GODDEERIS, “Secretive Spies or Ordinary Clerks? Polish Communist Intelligence Services in Brussels, 1975-89”, *Dutch Crossing*, 39/4, 2015, 246-260.

40. DUCO HELLEMA & GILES SCOTT-SMITH, *De Amerikaanse ambassade in Den Haag: Een historische blik achter de betonnen schermen van de Amerikaans-Nederlandse betrekkingen*, Amsterdam, 2016.

This project drew on several important studies of British and American diplomatic missions that demonstrated the historical value of investigating an embassy as a diplomatic unit with its own infrastructures, social networks, and behaviours.⁴¹ A study by Pieter Lagrou of the US embassy in Brussels in 1944-46 has laid the groundwork for doing the same in Belgium, and the field of urban geography has also turned its attention to the micro-geographies of diplomacy, focusing on diplomacy as a spatial, predominantly urban practice involving buildings, social networks, patterns of behaviour, and forces of securitisation.⁴²

It may indeed be wise not to overestimate the importance of Brussels in comparison with other Western capitals, but it was nevertheless a centre for Third World students and intellectuals to congregate and network, and that gave it its own importance regardless of what happened elsewhere. Considerable work has been done on Third World transnational solidarity movements by Kim Christiaens and others, but the idea of taking Brussels as a sociological/ideological site for urban geography investigation has not been attempted.⁴³ In his “intellectual history of anti-imperialism” centred on the role of “transnational and transregional networks and intellectual exchange centered in interwar Paris,” Michael Goebel portrayed how “The French capital functioned as a vantage

point that clarified the contours of a global system.... That is, we must grant more attention to the everyday experiences of non-Europeans in the metropole.”⁴⁴ Madeleine Herren, in similar fashion, has traced the ‘spatialities of internationalism’ in interwar Geneva.⁴⁵ Both can serve as inspiration for reconfiguring the meaning of Brussels as a transnational contact zone. Archival sources suggest that from 1960 the US embassy regularly reported on the political activities of Congolese students studying in Belgium, particularly as, once they lost Belgian financial support, many were offered full scholarships immediately by alert Soviet, East German, and Czech cultural officials.⁴⁶ In 1961 the embassy described the Free University of Brussels as “a mecca for foreign students from the Curtain countries as well as for Afro-Asian students,” leading to a disruptive student politics.⁴⁷ Outside of Brussels, the regional and indeed global implications and impact of the decades-long training of young professionals at the *Collège de l'Europe* has, as far as I know, not yet been brought into focus.

Secondly, the involvement of Belgians in transnational activity that stretched beyond Belgium's borders. As Penny von Eschen has said, “Cold war era transnational projects generated sites for political negotiation and leverage.”⁴⁸ The Cold War was a motivation for political activism – most people

41. JONATHAN COLMAN, “Portrait of an Institution: The US Embassy in London, 1945-53”, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 4, 2009, 339-360; MICHAEL HOPKINS, SAUL KELLY & JOHN YOUNG (ed.), *The Washington Embassy: British Ambassadors to the United States 1939-1977*, Basingstoke 2009; ALISON HOLMES & J. SIMON ROFE (ed.), *The Embassy in Grosvenor Square: American Ambassadors in the United Kingdom 1938-2008*, Basingstoke, 2012; IGOR LUKES, *On the Edge of the Cold War: American Diplomats and Spies in Postwar Prague*, Oxford, 2012; ROGELIA PASTOR-CASTRO & JOHN YOUNG (eds.), *The Paris Embassy: British Ambassadors and Anglo-French Relations 1944-1979*, Basingstoke, 2013.

42. PIETER LAGROU, “US Politics of Stabilization in Liberated Europe: The View from the American Embassy in Brussels, 1944-46”, *European History Quarterly*, 25, 1995, 209-246; VIRGINIE MAMADOUH, ANNE MEIJER, JAMES SIDAWAY & HERMAN VAN DER WUSTEN, “Towards an Urban Geography of Diplomacy: Lessons from The Hague”, *The Professional Geographer* 67, 2015, 564-574.

43. See KIM CHRISTIAENS, *Orchestrating Solidarity: Third World Agency, Transnational Networks and the Belgian Mobilisation for Vietnam and Latin America (1960s-1980s)*, PhD Dissertation, University of Leuven, 2013; KIM CHRISTIAENS, JOHN NIEUWENHUYIS & CHAREL ROEMER (eds.), *International Solidarity in the Low Countries during the Twentieth Century: New Perspectives and Themes*, Oldenbourg, 2020.

44. MICHAEL GOEBEL, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism*, Cambridge, 2015, 3.

45. MADELEINE HERREN, “Geneva, 1919-1945. The Spatialities of Public Internationalism and Global Networks”, in HEIKE JÖNS, PETER MEUSBURGER & MICHAEL HEFFERNAN (eds.), *Mobilities of Knowledge*, Cham, 2017, 211-226.

46. ‘Educational Exchange: FY 1960 Annual Report,’ 8 August 1960, Records of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Exchange, Box 315 Folder 9, Special Collections, University of Arkansas.

47. ‘Educational and Cultural Exchange: Annual Report on the Educational Exchange Program, FY 1961,’ 31 July 1961, *Ibid.*

48. PENNY VON ESCHEN, ‘Locating the Transnational in the Cold War,’ in RICHARD IMMERMANN AND PETRA GOEDDE (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 452.

probably engaged directly with Cold War issues through forms of protest, be that anti-nuclear or anti-American or anti-Soviet in one form or another. The international activities of the Vlaams Aktiekomitee tegen Atoomwapens (VAKA), for instance, are worth studying in more detail.⁴⁹ Von Eschen's comment also applies to elite networks. The 'network turn' in the history of European integration, led by Wolfram Kaiser in particular, has moved away from political science's fixation with policy outcomes to instead devote attention for transnational coalition-building and political networks that cover "processes of socialization and political transfer [which] mainly take place in trans-governmental and transnational spaces".⁵⁰ The notion of transnational communities, originally applied by migration research to diasporas, is also relevant in terms of forms of allegiance to a project or identity that transgresses the nation-state and simplistic, territorial nationalism.⁵¹ For instance, the Belgian wing of the transnational Paix et Liberté network was formed in 1951, but we still know very little about what it actually did.⁵² The West European Volk en Verdediging network – represented in Belgium by Militianen Actie (Milac) and Armée Jeunesse – was formed in the early 1960s to monitor and maintain positive civil-military relations, and by the 1970s its conferences were calling for the need to counter the corrosive effects of Detente and the decline in the communist threat on public perceptions of

defence spending and NATO.⁵³ Yet there is as yet no study of the involvement or standpoint of the respective Belgian organisations in this campaign.

In terms of transnational individuals, a figure such as Paul van Zeeland offers a perfect example. It is essential to appreciate how van Zeeland understood the role of a small state such as Belgium within the forcefields of international politics. For him, king and country remained paramount, yet interdependence was not only unavoidable but also, in the interests of peace and prosperity, inherently desirable. His activism in the post-war years therefore represented an attempt to maintain national sovereignty, block moves towards supranationality, and yet solidify transnational solidarity and cooperation via border-transcending sectoral arrangements and informal networks at the elite level. In this way he had a profound vision of both a national and a transnational system of order. He pursued the construction of such an order along three overlapping, simultaneous pathways: European integration based on economic interdependence, which would be firmly situated within an Atlantic context and under US protection, and further cemented via a common Christian heritage.⁵⁴ Van Zeeland's transnational activism, Catholic-orientated and trans-Atlantic in scope, does not fit neatly into any orthodox conception of Belgium as a unitary nation-state, and yet he pursued it, as he saw it, as a vital necessity

49. See MATTHIJS VAN DER BEEK, 'Beyond Hollanditis: The Campaigns against the Cruise Missiles in the Benelux 1979-1985', *Dutch Crossing* 40 (2016), pp. 39-53.

50. WOLFRAM KAISER, *Christian Democracy and the Origins of the European Union* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 2.

51. MARIE-LAURE DJELIC & SIGRID QUACK (eds.), *Transnational Communities: Shaping Global Economic Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

52. "In België werd de organisatie officieel in oktober 1951 opgericht en was hiermee het tweede land waar een afdeling van Paix et Liberté ontstond. De stichters in België waren een Luikse industrieel Jean Moyaerts, de onvermijdelijke Marcel De Roover, Jean Wolf (journalist bij het extreem-rechtse blad *Septembre*), Emile Delcourt (oprichter van de extreem-rechtse naoorlogse verzetsbeweging FNBI), Gaston Jacqmin (gewezen hoofdredacteur van *Septembre*)." KLAARTE SCHRIJVERS, *L'Europe sera de droite ou ne sera pas! De netwerking van een neo-aristocratische elite in de korte 20^{ste} eeuw*, PhD dissertation, University of Gent, 2007, p. 252. See also BERNARD LUDWIG, *Anticommunisme et guerre psychologique en République fédérale d'Allemagne et en Europe (1950-1956): Démocratie, diplomaties et réseaux transnationaux*, PhD dissertation, Université de Paris-I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2011.

53. GILES SCOTT-SMITH, "Civil-Military Relations during Détente: The People and Defence Network in the 1960s and 1970s", in POUL VILLAUME, RASMUS MARIAGER & HELLE PORS DAM (eds.), *The Long 1970s: Human Rights, East-West Détente, and Transnational Relations*, London, 2017.

54. For a fuller exposition of van Zeeland in the context of transnational political networks see G. SCOTT-SMITH, "Elite Networks of Allegiance", in MATHIEU SEGERS & STEVEN VAN HECKE (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the European Union*, Cambridge, 2023, 494-515.

in support of the national interest. Biographies of his work have so far failed to capture the wider meaning of this world view, or its significance for Belgium through the 20th century.⁵⁵

Then there is the research on transnational anti-communism that has situated Belgium as a key node within trans-European networks and beyond. Catherine Lanneau has covered the activities of the right-wing catholic anti-communist networks who supported a Gaullist-style European confederation in the 1960s, assembling an impressive amount of evidence to position them as a fringe group lacking much political influence.⁵⁶ The colonial and the transnational have intertwined in key works such as *Death in the Congo* by Emmanuel Gerard and Bruce Kuklick.⁵⁷ We now have a clearer idea of the activities of Marcel de Roover, right-hand man of Paul de Lanoit and the Brufina holding company conglomerate. De Roover is known for connections with André Moyen and his Belgian Anti-Communist Bloc, which was financed by Brufina and Société Générale, as well as being a central figure in Otto von Habsburg's Centre Européenne de Documentation en Information (CEDI).⁵⁸ De Roover's papers also indicate close contact with Vassily Orekhov, a source of information on the Soviet Union via the Union Nationale Russe, as well as regular meetings with Portuguese intelligence officers regarding the tracking of leftist resistance networks opposing Lisbon's colonial empire. Is this someone to be dismissed as a fringe character, dealing in Cold War dreams adrift from political reality? As Auwers remarked, de Roover's significance has often been downplayed by historians.⁵⁹ Yet de Roover's importance can be reformulated along three principal lines. Firstly,

the tenacity of colonial worldviews and their malleability in terms of the anti-communist cause during the Cold War. De Roover's anti-communism included Africa as a key battleground, with cross-colonial ties providing the legitimacy for action. Secondly, he maintained high-level informal diplomatic contacts with the Americans, the Portuguese, and probably others, despite his lack of any official diplomatic status. Thirdly – and surely the key to the previous point – his position at the top of one of Belgium's largest corporate enterprises ensured his access to and engagement with elite circles, something that strengthened his own version of the 'national interest' outside of democratic legitimacy. It would be wrong to dismiss the case of De Roover as either an anomaly or a harmless eccentric, because its illustration of interlocking national and transnational elite networks of allegiance clearly challenges our basic categories of the small state, the unitary actor, and national security. State and private have here become almost indistinguishable, at least psychologically. As Alloul and Auwers pointed out,

thinking about the mandates of modern capitalism (relations of production, capital accumulation, labor relations, class domination) brings us to further question the central role of the state, paramount in traditional diplomatic historical narratives.... An important sub-theme in the scholarship has been how firms or holdings, individually or collectively, conducted their own diplomacy vis-a-vis foreign national organs, with or without support from official channels.⁶⁰

This intertwining of business interests, diplomatic practice, and ideological fervour could be explored further in the Belgian context.⁶¹

55. See for an overview of his activities VINCENT DUJARDIN & MICHEL DUMOULIN, *Paul van Zeeland 1893-1973*, Bruxelles, 1997.

56. CATHERINE LANNEAU, « De gaullisme a la droite radicale: Les étranges "compagnons de route" belges de l'Europe gaullienne », in OLIVER DARD (ed.), *Doctrinaires, vulgarisateurs et passeurs des droites radicales au XX^e siècle (Europe-Amérique)*, Berne, 2012, 99-126.

57. EMMANUEL GERARD & BRUCE KUKLICK, *Death in the Congo*.

58. See SCHRIJVERS, *'l'Europe sera de droite ou ne sera pas!'*; EMMANUEL GERARD, WIDUKIND DE RIDDER, & FRANÇOISE MULLER (eds.), *Wie heeft Lahaut vermoord?*

59. AUWERS, "Koele minnaars," 59.

60. ALLOUL & AUWERS, 120.

61. For example see RIK COOLSMAET, *Belgie en zijn buitenlandse politiek*, Leuven, 1998.

V. Conclusion

Using the three layers of Actor, Target and Site, this article suggests that a combined ‘cultural and transnational turn’ in the study of Belgium and the Cold War would open up new spaces for investigation. Such a turn would link the global tensions of the Cold War ideological contest to everyday life, from patterns of consumerism and forms of modernism to education and media. It calls for attention to how the Cold War was represented in imagery and discourse across social, cultural, and political life. It emphasises the importance of capturing and investigating not just Cold War memory, both public and private, but also images of post-Cold War futures.⁶² It challenges our basic assumptions on who had agency in the Cold War, in which inter-

ests they were acting, and what this tells us about state-society relations. It would stimulate a new look at existing source materials and a renewed search for up till now disregarded archival collections and other forms of Cold War archaeology. This article is no more than a sketch of possibilities. The New Diplomatic History approach offers a wide range of examples for re-imagining the Belgian Cold War experience, and even then, as Alloul and Auwers rightly pointed out, there is more attention needed for how gender hierarchies, economic inequalities, and the post-colonial experience have shaped the field of enquiry.⁶³ Ultimately, Nikolai Skuridin’s MiG is the perfect reminder that Cold War dynamics impacted lives in the most unexpected of ways, and how we need to adapt our frameworks of analysis to make sense of that.

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62. See SIEGFRIED WEICHLEIN, “Representation and Recoding: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Cold War Cultures”, in KONRAD JARAUSCH, CHRISTIAN OSTERMANN & ANDREAS ETGES (eds.), *The Cold War: Historiography, Memory, Representation*, Oldenbourg, 2017, 19-66.

63. As an excellent example on how gender can be used as a means to re-imagine diplomacy, see SUSANNA ERLANDSSON, *Personal Politics in the Postwar World: Western Diplomacy behind the Scenes*, London, 2022.