

## AN UPHILL BATTLE

*Campaigning for the Militarization of Belgium, 1870-1914*

*- Nel de Mûelenaere -*

Belgium plays a minor role, if it is mentioned at all, in the annals of the previously unparalleled European militarization that led to the First World War. This article presents a more nuanced image of Belgium as a non-militarized state during these decades, by focusing on the attempts of the militaristic political lobby to expand Belgium's military infrastructure. Between 1870 and 1914, Belgium was indeed the scene of an intense militaristic movement that, despite its high level of activism, quickly fell into oblivion. At the start of their campaigns, in which the main goal was the adoption of personal military service, the militaristic lobbyists were primarily military or ex-military functionaries. The main motivation for their campaign was improving the sense of military purpose that acted as a preparation for war. This changed fundamentally throughout the campaigns. The militarists steadily built up a civilian network and expanded their influence. This was a key factor in the successful dissemination of the idea that a reformed Belgian army was very much needed in order to avert external dangers. At the same time, civilian influence altered the militarists' view of the societal role of the military. This reciprocal influence reduced the gap between the military and civilian worlds, and suggests the presence of under-acknowledged militarization processes in Belgium prior to World War One.

## I. Introduction

At the World Fair of 1897, a silent procession of 13,000 former soldiers and citizens strode through the streets of Brussels<sup>1</sup>. In rows six men wide, demonstrators marched on the Royal Palace with no music, flags, and not even the shouting of slogans. Six carriages carrying veterans of the Belgian Independence War headed the procession, followed by soldiers' associations and mainly Liberal, but officially non-partisan, civilian organizations. The demonstrators voiced their demands for an increase in military spending and the adoption of personal military service<sup>2</sup>. Later that day, seven retired generals were received in audience by the King, who reassured them that they were preaching to the converted<sup>3</sup>.

The militaristic movement, on the contrary, did not convince the Belgian Catholic government. The Minister of Interior Affairs Frans Schollaert (1895-1899) dismissed the demonstration as "a fitness walk for old generals"<sup>4</sup>. The militaristic protest march was the public culmination of nearly thirty years of intense political struggle for a stronger defense policy. The disappointing performance of the Belgian army during the 1870 Franco-Prussian War had sparked an informal political move-

ment of army officials and prominent Liberals pursuing the goal of a more powerful Belgian army. Much to their dismay, the pressure group suffered repeated political defeats. As a result, Belgium was viewed as the least militaristic state in Europe, a country where more generals fell during the debates over the defense budget than on the actual battlefield<sup>5</sup>.

It is hardly surprising that these militaristic campaigns were quickly forgotten. Traditionally, Belgium has always maintained an anti-militaristic self-image, reinforced by its international statute of neutrality. The history of the militaristic lobby has therefore been written largely from the perspective of an anti-militaristic counter-movement. The three most intense campaigns in 1886, 1897, and 1908-1913 were discussed by Emile Wanty (1957), Luc De Vos (1985) and, more recently, Gita Deneckere (2005). Emile Wanty focuses on the role of army officials in the campaigns and minimalizes their political influence. Luc De Vos offers a more elaborate description of militaristic actions, with the added value of an analysis of the role of the King and the clergy<sup>6</sup>. Gita Deneckere, in turn, points out the unlikely alliance between the militaristic and Socialist movements, both of whom were campaigning for generalized conscription<sup>7</sup>. The militaristic policies of Leopold II (1865-1909) are without

1. For the number of attendants, I am following the rough estimate of : Luc De Vos, *Het effectief van de Belgische krijgsmacht en de legerwetgeving*, Brussel, 1985, p. 265. According to the organizer, Léon Chomé, there were 50,000 protesters; the police downsized that number to 6,000-7,000 people (GITA DENECKERE, ELIANE GUBIN, JEAN-PIERRE NANDRIN & ELS WITTE, *Nieuwe geschiedenis van België I. 1830-1905*, Tielt, 2005, p. 645). 2. *Persoonlijke dienstplicht* or *service personnel* entailed the abolishment of the replacement system, and the obligation of every conscripted man to serve in the army personally. 3. "Vous prêchez un converti" (LÉON CHOMÉ, *La manifestation nationale du 13 Juin 1897*, Bruxelles, 1897, p. 224). 4. "Une promenade hygiénique des vieux généraux" (ÉMILE WANTY, *Le milieu militaire Belge de 1830 à 1914*, Bruxelles, 1957, p. 182). 5. FERNAND LEHOUCQ, *Het antimilitarisme in België, 1830-1914*, Brussel, 1958, p. 244. 6. LUC DE VOS, *Het effectief...* 7. GITA DENECKERE, ELIANE GUBIN, JEAN-PIERRE NANDRIN & ELS WITTE, *Nieuwe geschiedenis...*, p. 643.



*"Towards the fight for personal service. The first campaign of the Belgian army", in "Le Rasoir", 30.7.1887. The army, led by Lieutenant-General Baron van der Smissen, attacks Parliament in order to implement personal military service. Catholic Member of Parliament Charles Woeste (1874-1922) repels the militaristic assault with the "Annales Parlementaires". (Collection Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History)*

doubt the best-documented aspect of the campaigns. Nonetheless, existing accounts fail to connect these efforts by the monarchy with a broader political movement<sup>8</sup>. The most holistic, though still somewhat sketchy, record of the militaristic campaigns to date remains Fernand Lehouck's study of Belgian anti-militarism (1958)<sup>9</sup>.

All the above-mentioned works share as a premise the strong antagonism between militarism and anti-militarism in nineteenth century Belgium, in which the militarists are politically isolated and vastly outnumbered. The militarists' political failing is generally seen to be the result of a disjointed relationship between the military and civilian worlds in nineteenth century Belgium. Most authors agree that prior to the First World War, attempts to militarize Belgium were of little consequence. The historiography of Belgian militarism and this perceived absence of

militarizing forces are inextricably linked to the study of militarization in Germany and France. The seemingly perfectly orchestrated preparation for war in those neighboring countries stands in stark contrast to the supposed non-militarization of Belgium that was above all a major point of contention and a source of endless political and societal debate. As a result, the study of Belgian militarism or militarization has never been taken seriously. Nonetheless, similar movements that were equally unsuccessful in achieving their political goals, such as the German *Flottenverein* and the British *National Service League*, have been interpreted as symptoms of the militarization of mentality and war-readiness<sup>10</sup>.

This article revisits the traditionally assumed dichotomy between the Belgian military and civilian spheres between 1870 and 1914<sup>11</sup>. I will re-examine the civil-military gap by

**8.** As in : ISABELLE FRIS-TACKX, *Le rôle du Roi en Belgique, dimensions internationales et de défense*, UCL, API, 1986. HENRI HAAG, "Le Roi, le gouvernement et l'État-Major de l'armée (décembre 1909-avril 1912)", in *Seriniul Lavaniense, Etienne van Cauwenbergh*, Louvain, 1961, p. 608-629. NADINE LUBELSKI-BERNARD, "Leopold II et la défense nationale", in *Akten van het Colloquium over de Belgische Krijgsgeschiedenis, 1830-1880*, Brussel, 1981, p. 217-228. **9.** The titles 'first and second general crisis' and 'the war of brochures' in the third part of this article are inspired by Lehouck's description of the campaigns (FERNAND LEHOUCK, *Het antimilitarisme...*, p. 60-61). **10.** GEOFFREY BEST, "The militarization of European society, 1870-1914", in JOHN R. GILLIS (ed.), *The militarization of the Western World*, London, 1989, p. 23. **11.** This article is part of a PhD thesis on Belgian civil-military relations and militarization processes between 1870 and 1914 (Research Unit Political History, University of Antwerp). My analysis is based on a total of 82 militaristic and anti-militaristic pamphlets and studies, published between 1869 and 1914. The pamphlets were consulted in the *Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History in Brussels*, the *Erfgoedbibliotheek Henri Conscience* in Antwerp, and the *Museum of the Camp of Beverlo*. In addition, I selected relevant articles from two army journals, the bi-monthly *La Belgique Militaire* (1870-1914) and the monthly *La Vie Militaire* (1912-1914). This was complemented by articles on the Belgian military in the Liberal journal *Revue de Belgique*, the inquiry about the army reforms published in the Liberal newspaper *L'Étoile Belgique* on 13 June and 20 June 1897, parliamentary debates (consulted via plenum.be), the local Catholic and Liberal newspapers *De Gazette van Kortrijk* and *De Stad Kortrijk*, and electronic searches in the Catholic newspaper *De Denderbode* (aalstcourant.nu) and the Liberal newspaper *Het Volksbelang* (digitaal.liberaalarchief.be/Periodieken/Volksbelang).

focusing on attempts of the military and liberal political elite to bridge it. This re-assessment of Belgian civil-military political interactions is inspired by new perspectives on militarism and militarization that encourage the study of less obvious political and societal militarization processes. Geographers, anthropologists, and military historians have pointed out the analytical weakness of the concept of militarism. Their first concern has been the negative connotations of the term stemming from its historic usage as a political and moral pejorative associated with German militarism leading up to both of the world wars. The second concern is the narrowness of a concept that fails to grasp the two-way relationship between civilian and military domains, and instead points to an ideological one-way transfer from the military to the civilian sphere. Military historians such as John R. Gillis and Peter Wilson and anthropologists such as Catherine Lutz and Cynthia Enloe proposed a solution to these fundamental shortcomings by replacing militarism with the less negatively charged concept of militarization<sup>12</sup>. Militarization as a multi-layered process and not merely an ideology comprises a wide range of cultural, political, and economic features, allowing for the conceptual framing of the interplay of military and civilian values.

This new conception of militarization as a non-absolute and reciprocal process enables

us to analyze more subtle manifestations of militarization in past societies. Strong anti-militaristic tendencies and a non-violent self-image do not necessarily prevent a society from becoming militarized. Belgium has been continually used as a historical example of deep-rooted anti-militarism. But, at the same time, Belgium responded surprisingly defensively to the German invasion in 1914. This paradox makes it a noteworthy, but recalcitrant case study for militarization processes before the First World War. As a physical process, militarization cannot be detected by measuring defense budgets, which are merely one of many aspects of a militarized society. Thus, the relative decrease of the defense budget in Belgium between 1870 and 1909 does not exclude deeper processes of militarization. As a mental process, it is not a one-dimensional ideology, diffused top down from the army to society. Instead, it is a shared perspective developed through constant interactions between the civilian and military spheres that influences the meaning of a range of societal phenomena.

Because research on Belgian militarization on the ground remains sparse, the study of the political elite's level of militarization is a suitable starting point. The active political lobby for a stronger defense, called 'militarists' by their opponents, was the most noticeable and productive force in the militaristic landscape. The historical account in the first part of this

12. JOHN R. GILLIS (ed.), *The militarization...*, p. 7; PETER WILSON, "Defining military culture", in *The Journal of Military History*, 2008, no. 1, p. 11-41; CATHERINE LUTZ, "Making war at home in the United States : militarization and the current crisis", in *American Anthropologist*, no. 3, 2002 (104), p. 725; Cynthia Enloe, Lecture "On how militarization affects culture, families and women". *Veterans for Peace Conference*, Boston, 2010, uploaded on YouTube, 27 September 2010, last accessed 5 October 2012, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAI6\\_KX5Ylw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAI6_KX5Ylw).

article tells the story of this emerging political lobby that campaigned for increased defense spending and the implementation of personal military service. These militaristic campaigns were carried out by (former) army officers, opinion-makers, and organizations that were associated with the army (such as the editors of *La Belgique militaire* and the veterans' organization *Fédération Nationale des Sociétés et des Cercles d'Anciens Militaires*), and Liberal politicians. The establishment of these military-civilian networks and the sheer amount of militaristic campaigning suggest that there was in fact a significant political attempt to militarize Belgium. Even though the campaigns were for a long time unsuccessful in revolutionizing the organization of the Belgian military, they managed to spark a heated debate about Belgium's military position. The civil-military political collaborations resulted in new conceptions of the role of the military in Belgian society, spelled out in a plethora of articles and pamphlets. The second part of this article analyzes the development and propagation of the militaristic lobby's world view, making use of the process-oriented securitization framework. This discursive, qualitative analysis follows three successive dynamics, namely (1) the construction of existential internal and external threats to the safety of Belgium; (2) the reformed army as sole protector against these threats; and (3) the reaction of the main political parties to this militarist perspective on the Belgian state and society.

## II. The Belgian militaristic campaigns

The Liberal-Catholic antithesis that polarized nineteenth century Belgian society equally influenced the debate on military issues. Nonetheless, opinion regarding the Belgian military diverged greatly across party lines<sup>13</sup>. The Belgian military had an explicitly Liberal profile. This was the result of a significant French Liberal component in the highest ranks of the military establishment in its early years, and was further reinforced by Catholic anti-militarism<sup>14</sup>. Despite this, Liberal movements were not invariably pro-militarization, and held a range of opinions on military matters. The Liberal Party included in its ranks pragmatic economic anti-militarists, ideological pacifists, and hawkish militarists. The Catholic Party was traditionally anti-militarist, not necessarily out of a pacifist idealism, but rather for what Gita Deneckere calls "pragmatic reasons"<sup>15</sup>. The Catholics were especially weary of what they called an anti-clerical and amoral garrison life, that kept Belgian youth away from more useful occupations. The anti-militarism in the Catholic Party became even more prominent with the gradual absorption of the Antwerp-based, anti-militaristic Meeting Party from 1865 onwards. Although military debate often ran along ideological lines, both parties were equally driven by electoral interests. Wealthy constituents who had the vote in the pre-1918 electoral system of census suffrage were loath to allow their sons to serve alongside

13. HENK DE SMAELE, "De politieke partijen in de Kamer, 1830-1914", in EMMANUEL GERARD, ELS WITTE, ELIANE GUBIN & JEAN-PIERRE NANDRIN (eds.), *Geschiedenis van de Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordiging, 1830-2002*, Brussel, 2003, p. 157. 14. ÉMILE WANTY, *Le milieu militaire...*, p. 206. 15. GITA DENECKERE, ELIANE GUBIN, JEAN-PIERRE NANDRIN & ELS WITTE, *Nieuwe geschiedenis...*, p. 640.

the proletariat in filthy barracks and therefore eagerly supported paying a replacement for their sons if they drew a bad ticket in the army lottery. The militaristic lobby became extremely vocal under consecutive Catholic governments. This does not indicate that the Liberal government fully accommodated militaristic demands. During their only term of office in the period under study, between 1878 and 1884, Liberal administrations hardly implemented any military reform or investment, with the exception of an amendment intended to annoy Catholics that forced seminarians to serve<sup>16</sup>. Nonetheless, the strengthening of the army infrastructure was picked up shortly thereafter as a main point of opposition by the Liberals during the militaristic campaigns from 1887 onwards.

The militaristic lobby of (former) army officers and Liberal publicists came to a head at four particular moments between 1870 and 1914. The campaigns of 1872-1874, 1886-1890, 1896-1899, and 1908-1913 caused a political storm in which each followed a similar pattern. An external or internal threat sparked a national debate on the Belgian defense system, but all subsequent proposals to improve the army's infrastructure met with strong political and public resistance. In reaction to this political unwillingness, army officers and civilian sympathizers launched a public campaign to pressurize decision-makers into investing in and reforming the armed forces.

### 1872-1874 : The first crisis of generals

The first campaign was provoked by the nationwide mobilization during the Franco-Prussian war. The disappointing response to the call to arms, with only 69 per cent of soldiers reporting for duty in the early days, worried both the military and political authorities and prompted them to establish a research commission into the reorganization of the dysfunctional army<sup>17</sup>. This hybrid committee (18 April 1871 - 4 December 1872) consisted of military experts and politicians of both Liberal and Catholic allegiance, but had a predominantly Liberal and military profile because of the scant attendance of politicians and the Liberal beliefs of most officers<sup>18</sup>. This was reflected in the outcome of the discussions : the commission recommended the abolition of the lottery system and an immediate implementation of personal military service. The commission's suggestions were not well received either by parliament or by the Catholic government of Barthélémy de Theux de Meylandt (1871-1874). In response to the lack of any political effort to reform the military, the Minister of War Henri Guillaume publicly resigned in November 1872<sup>19</sup>. This drastic action was endorsed by the entire general staff, which refused to appoint a new Minister of War for six months<sup>20</sup>. The political strike of the Belgian defense sector was backed by fierce public campaigning in a wealth of pamphlets by activist officers between 1873 and

16. ÉMILE WANTY, *Le milieu militaire...*, p. 176. 17. LUC DE VOS, *Het effectief...*, p. 170. 18. *Idem*, p. 177. 19. *Parlementaire Handelingen : Kamer* (Belgian Chamber of Representatives), plenary session of 10 December 1872, p. 173. 20. FERNAND LEHOUCQ, *Het antimilitarisme...*, p. 59.



*Composition de M. Ganz.*

**BELGES DEBOUT, LE CLAIRON SONNE,  
LE DEVOIR AVANT TOUT.**

**LISEZ *La Belgique Militaire***

**POUR ABONNEMENTS : Rue Albert-de-Latour, 50, Bruxelles**

*"Belgians rise, the clarion calls, duty above all", publicity (s.d.) in "La Belgique Militaire". The bi-weekly journal "La Belgique Militaire" was founded in 1870 by Léon Chomé, and became the voice of the militaristic political lobby. (Collection Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History)*



1878<sup>21</sup>. This militaristic campaign differed from earlier efforts in its intensity and organization<sup>22</sup>. The newly founded bi-weekly journal *La Belgique Militaire* became the voice of nineteenth century *militocracy*, as Fernand Lehouck appropriately named the movement<sup>23</sup>. Its editorial board helped organize campaigns by the army officers. The militarists introduced completely new themes using new campaign methods. Army officials advocated the adoption of the Prussian system of compulsory military service, which had also been the inspiration for French army reforms in 1872. The brochures presented the replacement system as a military, as well as a political and social, failure<sup>24</sup>. The internal threat with its origins in social inequity and the external threat of a potential new Franco-German war were first introduced in this campaign, and would become the leitmotif of militaristic reasoning until World War One. The campaigns did not go unnoticed and the debate was continued in parliament.

An extensive body of plenary minutes on *la question militaire* shows that the debate was at the top of the political agenda<sup>25</sup>. At this point of the campaign, the militarists could count on hardly any political support. Their initiatives elicited ardent anti-militaristic comment in the Catholic and Liberal press. More surprisingly, the military *Journal de l'Armée* equally opposed what they called the unnecessary alarmism of the militarists<sup>26</sup>. As a result, *La Belgique Militaire* presented itself as the lone voice of reason amidst widespread blind denial<sup>27</sup>. The number of brochures quickly dropped after 1874, and although *La Belgique Militaire* and prominent officers remained vocal about military reform, the public and political elite steadily lost interest in the issue. Political apathy towards all things military continued throughout the term of the newly elected Liberal government between 1878 and 1884. The “first school” controversy determined the political agenda, and military questions were pushed into the background.

21. For example : [ANONYMOUS], *La vérité sur le remplacement militaire et le service personnel*, Bruxelles, 1874, p. 16; [ANONYMOUS], *Les adversaires du service obligatoire mis au pied du mur. Réponse à MM. Frère, Pirmez, Dumortier et Hymans (extrait de La Belgique Militaire)*, Bruxelles, 1873, p. 41; CAPITAINE DANEBROG, *L'Armée le service personnel et la frontière allemande*, Bruxelles, 1873, p. 54; COLONEL BRIALMONT, *le service obligatoire. Réponse à MM. Frère-Orban et Hymans. Lettre adressée à La Belgique militaire*, Bruxelles, 1872, p. 72; MAJOR BEERNAERT, *Etre ou n'être pas. Armée, indépendance, nationalité*, Bruxelles, 1872, p. 40; [ANONYMOUS], *première d'un simple soldat à M. Woeste*, Bruxelles, 1878, p. 7. [ANONYMOUS], *La vérité sur la défense nationale*, Bruxelles, 1878. 22. This was not the first time that officers commented publicly on military policy. Between 1866 and 1870, many military brochures accompanied the legislative discussions on the army reform of 1870. An overview of military publications on army infrastructure between 1830 and 1914 can be found in *Bibliographie d'histoire militaire Belge des origins au 1er août 1914*, Bruxelles, 1979, p. 287-304. 23. FERNAND LEHOUCQ, *Het antimilitarisme...*, p. 60. 24. As in GÉNÉRAL GOETHALS, *Du service obligatoire au point de vue de l'équité pour tous*, Bruxelles, 1872, p. 10. 25. As in *Parlementaire Handelingen : Kamer* (Belgian Chamber of Representatives), plenary session on 21 december 1872, p. 255, 30 April 1873, p. 1034 and 1 May 1873, p. 1052. 26. C.E.M., *Réponse à l'article du Journal de l'Armée sur la brochure 'Resterons-nous Belges?'*, Anvers, 1872, p. 8. 27. [ANONYMOUS], *Mauvais symptômes (extrait de La Belgique militaire)*, Bruxelles, 1874, p. 19.

### 1886-1889 : The war of brochures

The Catholic electoral victory of 1884 brought a profound change to the political landscape. Militaristic hopes rose because the King, traditionally an outspoken supporter of a stronger army, had pressurized the new government into discharging Charles Woeste and Victor Jacobs, both outspoken anti-militarists. This made the government less hostile towards military investment<sup>28</sup>. Two years later, army reform became urgent because of the internal social struggle that burst out in serious riots in Liège, Charleroi, and the Borinage, and the increasing threat of a new Franco-German war. These internal and external threats increased public sympathy towards the armed forces, and enabled the King and militaristic pressure groups to make reform a political priority. Two military bills were brought before Parliament in the summer of 1887. The first bill, engineered by Lieutenant-General Alexis Brialmont, proposed a fortification of the Meuse region and particularly the cities of Namur and Liège in order to slow down a potential French or German crossing of the River Meuse. Despite fierce Liberal opposition, that denounced the negative economic consequences of the plan, the bill was passed on 14 June 1887 and construction work began immediately<sup>29</sup>. The second bill proposed a fundamental reform

of the structure of the army similar to the proposition by the parliamentary commission in 1873. It was read out before Parliament by Adrien d'Oultremont, independent Member of Parliament<sup>30</sup>. This time round, the military strategic benefits of implementing personal military service were outweighed by social arguments in favor of an army that was more representative of the nation as a whole. Military involvement in the violent clashes between social protesters and the authorities illustrated once again the inherent social problem of the inequity of a call-up lottery system that allowed replacements. Military observers warned that a proletarian army would no longer obey orders and would take the side of the protesters<sup>31</sup>. Despite intense royal lobbying, a small majority rejected the bill on 14 July 1887. This rejection triggered a second militaristic campaign, far exceeding the previous one in intensity. Furious officers and politicians caught, what Fernand Lehouck called, a serious case of *Brochuritis*, and produced a previously unseen number of brochures over the course of the next three years. The military state of affairs was discussed at length in a “multi-colored and venomous brochure-heraldry”<sup>32</sup>. Each pamphlet offered a slightly different solution to the military question, whilst firing insults against political adversaries<sup>33</sup>.

28. FERNAND LEHOUCK, *Het antimilitarisme...*, p. 60. 29. *Parlementaire Handelingen : Kamer* (Belgian Chamber of Representatives), plenary session on 14 June 1887, p. 1347. 30. FERNAND LEHOUCK, *Het antimilitarisme...*, p. 61. 31. LUC DEVOS, *Het effectief...*, p. 228. 32. “Bontkleurige en venijnige brochureheraldiek” (FERNAND LEHOUCK, *Het antimilitarisme...*, p. 60-1). 33. As in LIEUTENANT-GÉNÉRAL BARON VAN DER SMISSEN, *Le service personnel et la loi de milice*, Bruxelles, 1887, p. 24; Un officier GÉNÉRAL, *Le service personnel. Réponse à Monsieur Woeste*, Bruxelles, 1887, p. 24; [Red brochure] P. GHESQUIÈRE, *Réponse à l'appel au bon sens*, Bruxelles, 1889; [Green brochure] COLONEL LAHURE, *La Belgique actuelle au point de vue commercial, colonial et militaire*, Bruxelles, 1889; [Blue brochure] G. LORAND, *La nation armée*, Bruxelles, 1889; [Orange brochure] LE COMTE CHARLES VAN DER BURCH, J. TERLINDEN, LE LIEUTENANT GÉNÉRAL D'ARTILLERIE JACMART, LE COMTE ADRIEN D'OULTREMONT,



*Lieutenant-General Henri Alexis Brialmont (1821-1903). Military engineer, publicist, Liberal Member of Parliament (1892-1894) and central figure within the militaristic lobby. (Collection Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History)*

This second militaristic crusade echoed the main trends seen in the 1872 campaign. Army officers were backed by doctrinaire Liberals and radicals who condemned the inequity of military recruitment procedures. The implementation of personal military service became one of the central points of Liberal opposition in Parliament. Lieutenant-General Alexis Brialmont, Member of Parliament for *la Ligue Libérale*, was one of the keenest militaristic advocates in Parliament<sup>34</sup>. The second militaristic campaign was extensively featured in the Belgian Catholic press: "If the outcome of this issue depended on the good judgment of the people, surely the militarists with their pernicious schemes would be blown to the moon"<sup>35</sup>.

### 1897-1899 : The second crisis of generals

The third militaristic campaign was initiated by the resignation of Minister of War General

Jacques Brassine on 11 November 1896, after his law proposing the abolition of the lottery system was blocked. This put the government in a similar position as in 1871: the generals refused to replace the Minister of War. The vacant position was filled by the Catholic Jules Vandenpeereboom (1896-1899) – a *pékin*, a term officers used for civilians who meddled in military affairs<sup>36</sup>. In the series of events that followed, the militarists' battleground expanded considerably. Lobby groups entered the public platform through a large demonstration, accompanied by newspaper and journal articles and an electoral campaign<sup>37</sup>. In January 1897, the editorial board of *La Belgique Militaire*, together with a group of prominent officers, started mobilizing the thriving veterans' organizations to arrange a protest march on 13 June 1897. The militarists dedicated two books to what they portrayed as a never

*Appel à la Nation. Précédé des appréciations des lieutenants-généraux Brialmont, Baron Van der Smissen, Baron Ferdinand Jolly & Nicaise et suivi du rapport sur le service personnel fait à la commission dur travail par le Baron de Haulleville*, Bruxelles, 1889; GÉNÉRAL ECKERMANS, *La nation désarmée*, Bruxelles, 1889, p. 12; [ANONYMOUS], *Le service personnel contre la nation armée par un officier de l'armée Belge*, Gand, 1889, p. 58; [ANONYMOUS], *La vérité sur la situation militaire de la Belgique. Lettre adressée à la Chambre des représentants par le brosseur du général N...*, Bruxelles, p. 1890, p. 32; Un vieux monsieur. Ex-fantassin de l'armée Belge, *Ni Noir, Ni Allemand, ni Française, ni Suisse. Belge, uniquement Belge*, Bruxelles, 1890, p. 45. **34.** EMMANUEL GERARD, ELS WITTE, ELIANE GUBIN & JEAN-PIERRE NANDRIN (eds.), *Geschiedenis van de Kamer...*, p. 464. **35.** "Hangt de uitspraak in deze kwestie van het goed oordeel des volks af, zeker is het dat de militaristen dan met hunne verderfelijke plannen naar de maan zullen geblazen worden!" (*De Denderbode*, 17.3.1889, p. 1). **36.** GÉNÉRAL BRIALMONT, *Solution de la question militaire en Belgique*, Bruxelles, 1901, p. 33; LUC DEVOS, *Het effectief...*, p. 263. **37.** Militaristic brochures published between 1895 and 1899 included [ANONYMOUS], *L'armée de demain*, Bruxelles, 1893, p. 30; NEMO, *De legerquastie in België*, Gent, 1895, p. 55; LÉON DE CANNART D'HAMALE, *Quelques mots sur la question militaire*. – Le Belgium-Congo – I., Bruxelles, 1898, p. 20; *Adres aan den koning goedgekeurd door de gepensioneerde officieren van het Belgisch leger in algemeene zitting van 12 Februari 1897 die Zijne Majesteit zal worden aangeboden, door eene afdeling van gezegde officieren, tijdens de groote manifestatie der gewezen militairen en Redevoering van de heer Graaf Visart de Bocarmé. Lid der Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers in de vergadering der gewezen strijders van het Belgisch legioen Impératrice Charlotte te Mexico*, Brussel, 1897, p. 44,

before seen gesture of patriotism by former soldiers<sup>38</sup>. The sympathy of at least a part of the Belgian political elite is reflected in three special editions of the Brussels Liberal journal *L'Étoile Belge*. In these special issues, as many as 149 prominent Belgians, of whom 113 were civilians, pleaded for a stronger defense policy and the immediate abolition of the replacement system. The militarists fulminated against the authorities for having ignored their military plans for more than 25 years. According to them, it was intolerable that a government should sabotage its own military infrastructure. In the words of Henri Willequet, a former Liberal Member of Parliament: "The fact that a government deserts the country's defense is in my eyes purely and simply an act of treason"<sup>39</sup>. The militaristic actions provoked a strong anti-militaristic counteraction. One month later, the Socialist Party organized a counter-demonstration against militarism that greatly exceeded the militarists' march in numbers<sup>40</sup>. Yet, paradoxically, the march was in favor of personal military service.

The militarists did not stop at national demonstrations. 52 veterans' organisations, united under *la Fédération Nationale des Sociétés et des Cercles d'Anciens Militaires* joined forces with the editorial board of *La Belgique Militaire*<sup>41</sup>. Since the start of the third militaristic campaign, this journal managed

a propaganda cash fund in which they collected, through generous contributions from army officers, the considerable sum of 5,000 Belgian francs. During the legislative elections of 1898, the Federation paid for electoral support for about 70 mostly Liberal militaristic candidates and 24,000 electoral posters featuring the King's speech of 13 June 1897 and a comparison of the Belgian war effort with those of France and Germany<sup>42</sup>. In addition, a letter pleading for more military investment was sent to every candidate taking part in the elections. Despite all this effort, the militaristic candidates suffered a crippling defeat. Political defeat, lack of resources, and the scant support of army officials (the lobbyists that served in the army were mainly officers speaking anonymously or in their own name) put out the fire that had fuelled the militaristic campaigns for 25 years<sup>43</sup>. Their only, modest achievement was the re-establishment of a mixed commission on 11 November 1900, as a result of parliamentary pressure by Lieutenant-General Alexis Brialmont. This hybrid commission discussed methods of recruitment, the size of the army, and the length of compulsory service. The commission was conflict-ridden from the start; heated arguments between officers and Catholics led to the resignation of four prominent Catholics in February 1901<sup>44</sup>. The commission recommended the immediate

38. LÉON CHOMÉ, *La manifestation nationale du 13 Juin 1897*, Bruxelles, 1897, p.224; CHARLES-JEAN TACKELS, *Considérations politiques des partis. La grande manifestation des officiers retraités et des ex-sous-officiers de l'armée*, Bruxelles, 1897, p. 197. 39. "À mes yeux, le fait d'un gouvernement de désertier la défense du pays est purement et simplement un acte de trahison" (*L'Étoile Belge*, 20.6.1897, p. 8). 40. According to police records 15,000-20,000 and according to the protestors 100,000 (GITA DENECKERE, ELIANE GUBIN, JEAN-PIERRE NANDRIN & ELS WITTE, *Nieuwe geschiedenis...*, p. 646). 41. ÉMILE WANTY, *Le milieu militaire...*, p. 205. 42. LUC DE VOS, *Het effectief...*, p. 266. 43. ÉMILE WANTY, *Le milieu militaire...*, p. 206-207. 44. The Catholics Charles Woeste, Auguste Delbeke, Joris Helleputte, and Arthur Verhaegen in February 1901 (ARTHUR VERHAEGEN, *Neutralité Belge et défense nationale*, Bruxelles, 1901, p. 3).

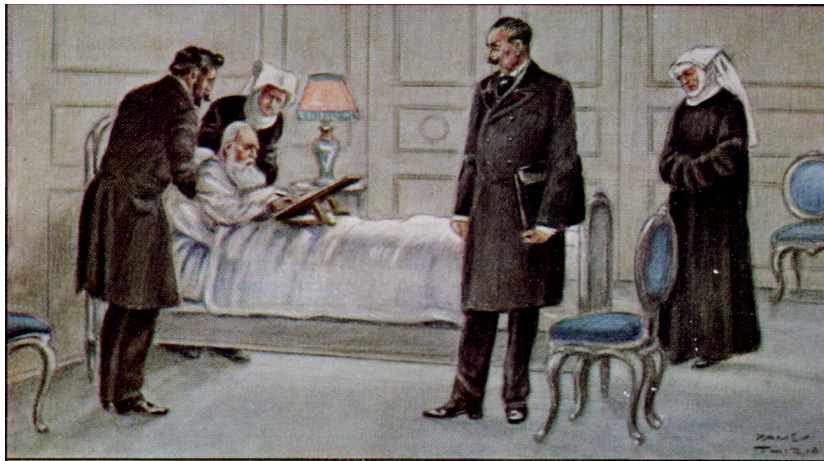
implementation of personal military service, but once again neither government nor Parliament was inclined to follow this up. Instead, a voluntary system was put in place, complementing the mandatory lottery. The system was known as the *essai loyal*; the length of military service was reduced but the size of the force remained the same. The laconic answer of the militarists was that anti-militarism had won yet again<sup>45</sup>.

#### 1908-1913 : The march towards universal conscription

Although the initial combative spirit had cooled down due to successive disappointments, militaristic efforts did not cease completely. The militarists continued to voice their discontent with the Catholic Minister of War Alexandre Cousebant d'Alkenande (1899-1907)<sup>46</sup>. In 1899, he had put an end to the Generals' strike and in 1902 he had accepted

the Catholic voluntary system<sup>47</sup>. After the implementation of the voluntary system, the prominent militarist General-Lieutenant Alexis Brialmont published a critical account of Belgian military infrastructure, urging the immediate implementation of personal military service<sup>48</sup>. In 1903, garrison life was defended against anti-militaristic criticism in 10,400 booklets entitled *La Caserne*<sup>49</sup>. Additionally, King Leopold II used the platform of Belgium's 75th anniversary celebrations once again to promote personal service. On the royal tour of Belgian cities, he repeatedly referred to the economic advantages of a strong army infrastructure and personal military service<sup>50</sup>. The Liberal opposition, led by Paul Hymans, was strongly opposed to the voluntary system and reacted furiously when the government refused to implement military reform. In April 1904, Leon Chomé and Captain A. Collon attempted to initiate a new

45. ÉMILE WANTY, *La vie militaire...*, p. 211. 46. Militaristic brochures published between 1900 and 1914 included [ANONYMOUS], *Consultation du pays sur la question militaire. Adresse du comité Directeur de la fédération des sociétés d'anciens militaires*, Bruxelles, 1900, p. 40; *Chambre des Représentants. Projet de loi relatif à la réorganisation de l'armée. Discours de M. Paul Hymans d'après les annales parlementaires. Séance de 23 octobre 1901*, Bruxelles, 1901, p. 53; ARTHUR VERHAEGEN, *Neutralité Belge et Défense Nationale. Extrait de la Revue Sociale Catholique*, 3. & 4.1901, 1901, p. 40; Le GÉNÉRAL BRIALMONT, *Solution de la question militaire en Belgique*, Bruxelles, 1901, p. 66; LOUIS NAVEZ, *Pourquoi la Belgique doit être en état de se défendre*, Bruxelles, 1901, p. 52; [LÉON CHOMÉ], *La Caserne*, Bruxelles, [1903], p. 14; J. RENKIN, *Anvers. Installations Maritimes et système défensif*, Bruxelles, 1905, p. 36; EDOUARD VAN DER SMISSEN, *La question d'Anvers (extrait de la Revue Générale)*, Bruxelles, 1906, p. 20; [ANONYMOUS], *Revue nationale de propagande libérale. La question militaire. Discours de M. Louis Franck. Député d'Anvers (Séance de la Chambre des Représentants du 22 octobre 1909). Service personnel-service d'un an*, Gand, 1909, p. 30; [ANONYMOUS], *Ce que tout belge doit savoir. La nouvelle loi militaire*, Bruxelles, 1909, p. 16; L. THIRIAUX, *Le militarisme (?) en Belgique*, Bruxelles, 1912, p. 12; [ANONYMOUS], *Réponses aux attaques dirigées contre le parti catholique à propos de la question militaire. L'œuvre des catholiques. La situation après les élections de 1912. Les effectifs. La charge financière. Le temps de service. La rémunération des miliciens*, Bruxelles, 1914, p. 16. 47. FERNAND LEHOUCQ, *Het antimilitarisme...*, p. 61. 48. GÉNÉRAL BRIALMONT, *Solution de la question militaire en Belgique*, Bruxelles, 1901, p. 33. 49. [LÉON CHOMÉ], *La Caserne*, Bruxelles, [1903], p. 14. 50. GITA DENECKERE, ELIANE GUBIN, JEAN-PIERRE NANDRIN & ELS WITTE, *Nieuwe geschiedenis...*, p. 646.



**LEOPOLD II**  
6. — Le couronnement de l'œuvre  
**Arome Liebig : assaisonne les mets sur table.**

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Explication au vi

*'The culmination of the work', advertising trade card (s.d.) distributed by the Liebig's Extract of Meat Company. The King famously signed the 1909 act for personal service on his deathbed, allegedly with the regal comment : "The King is pleased". (Collection Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History)*



*"Belgians! Give the army soldiers and weapons!", Propaganda postcard (1913) distributed by la Ligue de la Défense Nationale, which was founded in 1908 by politicians from the Liberal Party and (former) officers to promote army investments. (Collection Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History)*



campaign with the support of the King. Under the pseudonym *Groeninghe*, they published an influential proposal for army reform in *La Belgique Militaire*. Their strategy was to meet their political opponents halfway, and the project proposed to enlist two sons per family and to shorten the length of military service considerably<sup>51</sup>. The plan was discussed in Parliament by the Liberal Paul Hymans on 4 December 1904 and 7 December 1905. Hymans claimed that not only the army, but the entire Belgian people shared his Liberal views on the military question, namely personal military service and a shorter period of service<sup>52</sup>. By 1886, the Liberals had become eager supporters of the militaristic cause. In the ensuing years a strong alliance developed between Liberals, officers, and former military men. The new nationalist movement, led by Léon Hennebicq, in particular, became a trusted ally in the fight for personal military service and a larger military force<sup>53</sup>. In 1908, they set up *la Ligue de la Défense Nationale*, with a sub-committee *la Ligue de Propagande de Service Personnel*. The executive committee consisted of Lieutenant-General Ducarne (President), General Jacoby and Hellebicq (Vice-President) and was assisted by the Liberal Paul Hymans and the Socialist Edmond Picard (although he had been expelled from the Socialist Party in 1908)<sup>54</sup>. According to Luc De Vos, there was a parallel militaristic movement named *Union des Sociétés pour la Défense Nationale*, also headed by Lieutenant-General Ducarne that claimed to represent 8,000 organizations<sup>55</sup>.

In May 1907, the sturdy Lieutenant-General Joseph Hellebaut (1907-1912) took on the position of Minister of War. As international tensions grew following repeated German threats to Belgian neutrality, the deficiencies (especially in the number of soldiers) of the voluntary military system became apparent. The Catholic majority blamed this on a military boycott of the voluntary recruitment system, but nevertheless set up a commission to investigate the army system. The Snoy Commission carried out its task between 16 March and 24 April 1909, confirming the failure of the *essai loyal*. Meanwhile, Minister of War Hellebaut was building support for a new army reform. Hellebaut tried to promote the *Groeninghe* Plan in Parliament on 24 November 1908, carefully speaking in his own name. The enthusiastic support of militaristic organizations was expressed in a demonstration on the 2 May 1909 and a written address to the King, Parliament, and Senate<sup>56</sup>. This time, the militaristic lobby did not solely carry the reform. The devoutly religious Minister rebuilt bridges between the army and their previous Catholic opponents, and was able to gain the sympathy of many Catholics for his army reform. As a result, military reform became an internal point of contention in the Catholic party. On one side of the debate stood Prime Minister Frans Schollaert (1908-1911) and church officials. The anti-militaristic front was led by Charles Woeste, formerly spokesperson of the anti-militarist movement and representing mainly rural Catholics. This time round, the supporters

51. LUC DE VOS, *Het effectief...*, p. 293; GROENINGHE, "La Conscription. Le service général", in *La Belgique Militaire*, 19.4.1904, p. 374. 52. *Parlementaire Handelingen : Kamer* (Chamber of Representatives), plenary session on 4 December 1904, p. 232 and on 7 December 1905, p. 145. 53. ERIK DEFOORT, "Het Belgisch nationalisme voor de Eerste Wereldoorlog", in *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, no. 85, 1972, p. 531. 54. ÉMILE WANTY, *Le milieu militaire...*, p. 239. 55. LUC DE VOS, *Het effectief...*, p. 299. 56. *Idem*, p. 303.

overruled the objectors. A new draft law proposed the enlisting of one son per family (unless the family's survival relied on his income), a reduction in the length of military service, and peacetime exemption for the clergy and future teachers. On the 1 December 1909, the proposal was passed; finally, and after 37 years of fierce campaigning, a system of personal military service had been established. The King famously signed the act on his deathbed, allegedly with the regal comment: "The King is pleased"<sup>57</sup>.

Without doubt the militarists shared the Royal feeling of contentment, but their campaigns did not end with the abolishment of the system of replacement. The initial popularity within the military of Minister of War Hellebaut after the 1909 act quickly declined, and was replaced with frustration over his inability to increase further preparations for war. In view of rising international tensions in Europe and the call to arms in neighboring countries, the militarists demanded more men and longer military service. An internal power struggle in the Minister's cabinet led to a lack of new policy initiatives and strict censorship of the writings of officers until 1912. Meanwhile, the new militaristic organizations further expanded their reach. Alongside a host of brochures and journal articles, *La Belgique Militaire* and *La Ligue de la Défense Nationale* organized countless conferences with over 60 speakers between 1909 and 1913; it commissioned plays, published 40,000 pam-

phlets, and distributed postcards<sup>58</sup>. The national press not only validated this militaristic line of reasoning, but also offered a platform for the campaigns<sup>59</sup>. In 1912, the independent newspaper *Le Soir* published a series of articles entitled *Sommes-nous prêts?* that painted a vivid picture of the state of the Belgian military<sup>60</sup>. This influential media campaign was discussed intensely in Parliament in November 1912. The "disloyal and treacherous" leaking of confidential information about the military infrastructure by officers was severely attacked, but their message that the army was not prepared for a potential German invasion was taken to heart<sup>61</sup>. The Minister of War had to answer as many as 53 parliamentary questions on the army's infrastructure. Internal organizational conflicts proved fatal for Hellebaut, who was forced to resign in February 1912. After a short interval during which Prime Minister Charles de Broqueville took on the position, he was succeeded by Victor Michel, who promised to implement the proposal suggested by the Liberal senator Hansen for a wartime army of 300,000 men. The new minister also lifted the ban on officers' writings. On 11 November 1912, Prime Minister de Broqueville (1911-1918) took over as Minister of War. Although the successful Catholic election campaign had succeeded through the promise that the military burden would not be increased, de Broqueville immediately augmented the military effort. The plan he presented to parliament on 13 February

57. "Le Roi est content" (*Idem*, p. 312). 58. ÉMILE WANTY, *Le milieu militaire...*, p. 239; MARIE-THÉRÈSE BITSCH, *La Belgique entre la France et l'Allemagne, 1905-1914*, Paris, 1994, p. 473. 59. Newspapers such as *Le Patriote*, *La Chronique*, *Le XXe Siècle*, *La Métropole*, *L'Indépendance Belge*, *La Meuse*, *La Gazette* (ÉMILE WANTY, *Le milieu militaire...*, p. 235). 60. MARIE-THÉRÈSE BITSCH, *La Belgique entre...*, p. 438. 61. *Parlementaire Handelingen : Kamer* (Chamber of Representatives), plenary session of 24 November 1911, p. 89.

included universal conscription and regional recruitment. This joint effort by the Catholic Charles de Broqueville, the Socialist Emile Vandervelde, and the Liberal Paul Hymans was passed in June 1912, and received an unusually warm welcome in the Catholic newspapers *Le Courier de Bruxelles* and *Le Patriote*<sup>62</sup>. In the renewed army, immediate preparations for war took prominence in *le service intensif*, rigorously inspected by ministerial delegations. Next to that, the first (not intermediary) civil Minister of War deeply intensified military efforts to improve civil-military relations. In concert with the militarists, the army actively tried to involve Belgian society in the preparation for war. On April 5 1912, the first issue of the widely distributed army journal *La vie militaire* was published with the explicit goal of improving the popularity of the army. The main objectives of the journal were “to unveil the army for our compatriots (...) in short, making them know, understand, and appreciate our military institutions”<sup>63</sup>. The army had its own stand at the World Fair, opened the Musée du soldat, and widely publicized new military weapons, such as military aircraft. The newfound popularity of Belgium’s military

forces, unparalleled since 1839, was shown in significant public interest<sup>64</sup>. Finally, after 40 years of campaigning, the militarists had achieved their political goals. That did not mean that the Belgian army, or by extension Belgian society, was prepared for the first European total and industrial war. The lack of Belgian preparedness for war and the country’s lack of military spirit was in fact a rare point of agreement amongst French, German, and British observers<sup>65</sup>. The Christian Democratic newspaper *De Werkman* articulated the not very belligerent Belgian self-image. “It is however of a large bestiality... This preparation of a real bloody War, while our Little Country should stay in its role; a small, neutral Country, not belligerent, with good, hard-working and prosperous people”<sup>66</sup>. The German invasion on 4 August 1914 brutally disrupted this peace-loving self-image. Despite its supposedly neutral and peaceful national character, Belgian defensive patriotism ruled the streets and institutions. Moreover, Belgium’s unexpected military enthusiasm functions as emblematic of the speedy and emotionally intense way in which European public opinion geared up for war<sup>67</sup>.

62. ÉMILE WANTY, *Le milieu militaire...*, p. 227. 63. “Dévoiler notre armée à nos compatriotes (...) bref, faire connaître, comprendre, apprécier nos institutions militaires, montrer les améliorations dont elles sont susceptibles (...) par là susciter chez nos compatriotes la confiance dans leur armée et la foi dans l’avenir du pays” (*La Vie Militaire*, 5.9.1912, p. 1). 64. ÉMILE WANTY, *Le milieu militaire...*, p. 244. 65. SOPHIE DE SCHAEPPDRUIJVER, *De Groote Oorlog. Het koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Antwerpen, 1997, p. 46. 66. “‘t Is nochtans groote beestigheid... Die bereiding tot echten bloedigen Oorlog, terwijl ons Landeken in zijnen rol moest blijven; klein onzijdig Land, niet oorlogsvoerend, met braaf, werkzaam, welvarend volk. Elk gerust latende, en geacht door iedereen. Onze sterkte moest zijn, dat elk hier gerust en gelukkig zou leven” (“In den kleinen oorlog”, in *De Werkman*, 5.9.1913, p. 2). 67. STÉPHANE AUDOIN-ROUZEAU & ANNETTE BECKER, *1914-1918. Understanding the Great War*, London, 2002, p. 95-96.

### III. A Belgian form of militarization

A curious pamphlet, entitled *Le Militarisme (?) en Belgique* circulated in the years prior to World War One<sup>68</sup>. In this pamphlet, the military historian L. Thiriaux argued that the peace-loving Belgian people were naturally opposed to any form of militarism, and could never be caught in a militaristic web like the great European powers of that time. The pamphlet reveals a public appetite for reconciling its national unwarlike self-image with the intensified militarization of Belgian society. The author applauded all militarizing efforts, but at the same time reassured the public that the people would stay immune to militarism. In essence, he proposed a moderate Belgian method of militarization, necessary to defend the nation against imminent danger, but without the excesses of blatant militarism witnessed in neighboring countries.

The subsequent writings of historians proved Thiriaux right. Belgium is rarely cited as an example of the processes of militarization that held Europe in their grip in the decades before World War One. Only one in 40 Belgian citizens served in the army, while the French soldier : population ratio was one in seven<sup>69</sup>. But then again, this military deprivation did not necessarily prevent militaristic worldviews from permeating several spheres of Belgian society. Although the impact of militaristic attitudes on society is still to be examined, a historical overview has demonstrated that militaristic pressure groups increasingly colo-

red political debate as World War One approached. In those decades, such pressure groups were one of the main militarizing forces in Belgian society. In what follows, I will disentangle their discourse exposing the basic notions of a particular form of Belgian militarization.

The constructivist theory of securitization offers unique insights into militaristic lobbying because it focuses on the process of creating an existential threat in order to pursue a political agenda, rather than on the material threat itself. By depicting an issue (for example foreign invasion or terrorism) as an existential threat to a referent object (such as the nation or the state), the securitizing actor (in this case lobby groups and the government) takes it outside the realm of normal decision-making. Securitization is closely related to militarization. The mental foundation of militarization is indeed that the nation-state is threatened, and that the army is the sole protector against that threat<sup>70</sup>. This theory of process-oriented securitization sheds light on how the militaristic lobby attempted to promote these two notions in order to achieve its political goals. Three crucial factors demand attention, and will be treated separately. Firstly, what were the existential threats and what was endangered according to the militaristic pressure group? Secondly, what were the solutions they proposed? Thirdly, did these ideas find fertile ground amongst the political elite?

68. L. THIRIAUX, *Le Militarisme (?) en Belgique*, Bruxelles, 1912, p. 12. 69. ÉMILE WANTY, *Le milieu militaire...*, p. 236. 70. RICHELLE M. BERNAZZOLI & COLIN FLINT, "Power, Place, and Militarism : Toward a Comparative Geographic Analysis of Militarization", in *Geography Compass*, 2009, no. 1, p. 400.



*"Belgians! While you applaud demagogues that flatter your selfishness and improvidence, the enemy is on the verge of invading you", Propaganda postcard (1913) distributed by "La Ligue de la Défense Nationale". (Collection Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History)*

### ***Resterons-nous Belges? Constructing a sense of Belgium being endangered***

Maintaining a large peace-time army can be an example of a tacit, but successful securitization process<sup>71</sup>. By facilitating these resource-greedy total institutions, the public implicitly acknowledges the need for a strong military force to protect the nation from threats to its very existence. In the case of nineteenth century Belgium, the need for such an army was publicly questioned. This resulted in a slow decline of the military budget (relative to total government expenditure) and a decades-long delay in abolishing the army replacement system for military call-up in comparison with other European states. According to the militarists, these anti-militaristic tendencies were the outcome of a long period of peace and economic wealth that made the political class easily forget and ignore potential dangers. The militarists saw it as their mission to awaken patriotic, virile feelings that had lain dormant for decades. For them, the survival of the nation was inextricably linked with the state of the army: "It is protected by a vigorous military organization that nations have grown; it is also by a degeneration of this force, that they all have fallen, incapable of resisting the blows that crushed them"<sup>72</sup>.

This brings us to the first obvious, but essential militaristic basic notion that the existence of Belgium was threatened. Nearly every

militaristic pamphlet, speech, or article contains a detailed portrayal of the specters threatening Belgium. These dangers came from both outside the state, that is a French or German invasion, and from within the nation, namely social struggle and moral degeneration. The identification and portrayal of an existential security threat to the nation-state is crucial in this militaristic discourse. By constructing a discourse of Belgium's vulnerability to attack, the militaristic protagonists aimed to create a legitimization of the unpopular military investment they proposed. They securitized these threats by depicting them as dangers to the existence of the Belgian nation-state, hoping to compel the government into taking emergency action.

Belgium's first and foremost threat supposedly came from its neighboring giants, France and Germany. After the Franco-Prussian war, France was rallying for *revanche* and Germany was frantically establishing itself as a European superpower. "France and Germany are armed to their teeth. They seem like two horrible monsters, staring in each other eyes while grinding their teeth, just waiting for the signal to start spreading destruction and extermination"<sup>73</sup>. According to militaristic writers, a new Franco-German war was impending, and could not be prevented. They warned that

71. BARRY BUZAN, JAAP DE WILDE & OLE WAEVER, *Security. A New Framework for Analysis*, London, 1998, p. 4. 72. "C'est, protégées par une vigoureuse organisation militaire, que les nations se sont condensés; c'est aussi par la dégénérescence de cette puissance que toute sont tombées, incapables de résister aux chocs qui les ont broyées" (LE MAJOR BEERNAERT, *Être ou n'être pas...*, p. 7). 73. "Vrankrijk en Duitschlans zijn gewapend tot de tanden. Zij gelijken aan twee afschuwelijke monsters die malkander knarsetandend in de oogen schouwen, en slechts een sein afwachten om vernieling en verdelging rond hun te zaaien" (R.P.B., *Van de legerkwestie. Een woord aan de kiezers*, Brussel, 1900, p. 7).

this next conflict would destroy Belgium, as it was the most logical military gateway between the two countries. “Nearly all German and French battles carry the names of Belgian towns, and, since the second half of the seventeenth century, almost every battle shattered our country”<sup>74</sup>. From the year 1900 onwards, it dawned on them that the greatest threat would come from Germany. Central to this debate was Belgium’s neutral status and the protection in the event of an invasion granted to Belgium by France, Prussia, Austria, Russia, and Great Britain in 1839. The militarists argued that the international treaty would probably not preserve Belgium in the next Franco-German war and that it should not restrain Belgium from building a strong military. They did not oppose the Belgium’s neutral status; on the contrary, a strong army was deemed necessary to defend Belgian territory. The militarists proposed armed neutrality, which was according to them demanded by the signatories of the treaty in exchange for their protection. To rely entirely on the signatories for protection was committing a breach of contract, and would lead to foreign military aid being withheld.

The securitization of the threat of a foreign invasion described above is characteristic of a military lobby, and applied to the traditional, but narrow, political and military domain. Here, the main concern is foreign violation of sovereignty through the use of force<sup>75</sup>. But, the

militarists transcended the traditional military-political domain in their depiction of the dangers to the Belgian nation-state. According to them, internal moral degeneration was at least as threatening as France or Germany. The militarists expressed a cultural pessimism about the moral collapse of the Belgian spirit that prevented the nation from following the path of modernity. This moral degeneration compromised the safety of Belgium, because it affected its military operation. In the political domain, it prompted politicians to deny the army much needed reform and investment. Within Belgian society, it undermined the public legitimacy of the armed forces, made the army a less-appealing career option, and most importantly made the recruits less effective soldiers. This moral degeneration was not only a threat to society because it undermined military capacity; it endangered the nation as a whole from the inside out. The ultimate and most harmful symptom of moral degeneration was the lack of national spirit and unity. To a militaristic way of thinking, nationalist feelings and military spirit were inextricably connected. Declining interest in the military was a logical consequence of, and a symptom of, the lack of patriotism. “There is only one conclusion from our successive disappointments and the final ruin of military hopes, that is that a national spirit does not exist in Belgium and that this country, by refusing to make the sacrifices necessary to maintain its neutrality, will be invaded, ruined, and conquered and one day, perhaps near at

74. “De veldslagen der Duitscher en der Franschen dragen bijna allen namen van Belgische gemeenten, en, sedert de helft der XVIIe eeuw hadden de meeste veldslagen de vermorzeling van ons land tot uitslag” ([ANONYMOUS], *Raadpleging van het land over de kriegsquestie. Verzoekschrift van het besturend komiteit aan de maatschappijen van gewezen soldaten*, Brussel, 1900, p. 8). 75. BARRY BUZAN, JAAP DE WILDE & OLE WAEVER, *Security...*, p. 38.

hand, a great war will burst out in Western Europe<sup>76</sup>.

The deterioration of the Belgian man and soldier manifested itself differently across society. In the lower classes, the origins of degeneration came from the lack of education and poisonous Socialist and anarchist ideas. Because of the inequality of the unjust lottery system for military call-up with replacement soldier, uneducated but decent Belgian men were allegedly exposed to misleading Socialist enticements. This endangered the Belgian army, because it undermined the military hierarchy that was deemed essential for its military mission. Army officials were especially weary of the direct threat of *le peril social* during the intense workers' riots of 1886. They feared that the soldiers' sympathy for the demonstrators would exceed their military loyalty and discipline, and that the proletarian soldiers would disobey their better-off superior officers. The moral decency of the recruits was also imperiled by the replacement soldiers, the unethical mercenaries who were seen as degenerates by the officers. The militarists assumed that without these harmful influences, the recruits would be exemplary soldiers and citizens. Amongst the upper classes, it was

decadence, apathy, and materialism that jeopardized Belgium's survival. The supposed protection offered by Belgium's neutral status against external threats was, according to the militarists, actually an internal threat. Because it gave the illusion of an international safety net, it allegedly made the Belgian people spoiled and indolent. To ask foreign powers to spill the blood of their young men in defense of Belgian soil while standing impotent on the sidelines, was rejected by the militarists as not manly and even less honorable. "The statement that our neutrality makes a strong defensive action obsolete, is a mockery against history and common sense; it degrades the national character, renounces all dignity and denies us the right to maintain an independent position among nations"<sup>77</sup>. Neutrality and the long period of peace since 1839 had supposedly made Belgians blind to the storm that was coming. A second reason for the alienation of the army and the lack of national spirit was public prosperity and the materialism that it initiated. "It is to this materialism of our times that has produced moral tension and weakened our characters, that we can attribute this temporary collapse of military spirit, of national sentiment that renders hostility towards personal service"<sup>78</sup>. The prosperity that created this national

76. "Il ne resterait plus qu'à tirer des déceptions successives et de la ruine finale des espérances de l'armée cette conclusion navrante, que l'esprit national n'existe pas en Belgique et que ce pays, refusant de faire les sacrifices qu'exige le maintien de sa neutralité, sera envahi, ruiné et conquis le jour, peut-être prochain, où une grande guerre éclatera l'Europe occidentale" (ALEXIS BRIALMONT, *Réponse aux objections de M. le lieutenant-général Baron Chazal contre les fortifications de la Meuse*, Bruxelles, 1887, p. 20). 77. "Dire que notre neutralité nous dispense d'une énergique action défensive, c'est se moquer de l'histoire et du sens commun, c'est dégrader le caractère national, abdiquer toute dignité, nous enlever le droit de conserver parmi les peuples une place indépendante" (LÉON PARMENIER, *Professeur à la faculté de Philosophie et Lettres de l'Université de Liège, L'Étoile Belge*, 20.6.1897, p. 6). 78. "C'est donc au matérialisme de notre époque, qui a produit l'énerverment moral et détrempe les caractères, que nous devons attribuer cette chute momentanée de l'esprit militaire, du sentiment national, que rend hostile au service personnel" (LE MAJOR BEERNAERT, *Être ou n'être pas...*, p. 32).



egoism was also the reason that Belgium was threatened by jealous neighbors. A brochure in 1900 compared Belgium to a foolish rich man, who kept his fortune on the table and his doors unlocked at night<sup>79</sup>. Although Belgium was – according to the militarists – the most wealthy country in the world, it was not solely Belgium’s enviable wealth that needed protection, but also its national virtues of unity, freedom, virility, democracy, and morality. And it was Belgium’s independence that guaranteed both its prosperity and national character. “Belgium needs to hold onto its independence; if she loses it she will not only suffer a material loss, but also a moral loss. Everything begins and ends with independence”<sup>80</sup>.

#### ***En Garde! Militarists to the rescue***

After identifying the dangers to the Belgian nation-state, the advocates for a stronger army brought militaristic solutions to the forefront. The most prominent feature of these solutions was the army’s monopoly as the protector against both external and internal threats. According to the militarists, a strong army was Belgium’s sole reliable guarantee for survival. In addition, the army presented itself as the remedy to the moral degeneration and class conflicts that had eroded the national union. The militarists reunited the cultural pessimism described above with a deep faith

in progress. These two apparently conflicting worldviews were in fact two sides of the same coin. Cultural pessimism indicated that the militarists, like many contemporaries, saw moral degeneration as a temporary setback for a society heading towards modernity<sup>81</sup>. The militarists presented the army as an essential tool for society to toss that coin on the right side. But, according to the militarists, in order to fulfill that role, the army needed a thorough reform. “It is time to get ready. *Donc – en avant! Vooruit!*”<sup>82</sup>.

The most urgent reform, essential to the survival of Belgium, was the implementation of personal military service. During the 40 years of militaristic campaigning for personal military service, one European country after another had adopted this mode of recruitment. For Belgium, the most endangered European state, not to join in this spirit of progress was incomprehensible for the militarists. “Belgium, on penalty of decay, must follow the example of other powers that have walked down the road of transformation”<sup>83</sup>. Personal military service was allegedly the most modern, progressive form of army recruitment, and the militarists dismissed alternative military systems as outdated. Voluntary service (proposed by the Catholics) was an *Ancien Régime* practice, and the armed nation of civilian-soldiers (proposed by the Socialists)

79. R.P.B., *Van de legerkwestie. Een woord aan de kiezers*, Brussel, 1900, p. 7. 80. “*La Belgique doit d’autant tenir l’indépendance qu’en la perdant elle serait frappée non seulement de déchéance matérielle, mais encore de déchéance morale. Tout naît et périt avec l’indépendance*” (LOUIS NAVEZ, *Pourquoi la Belgique doit être en état de se défendre*, Bruxelles, 1901, p. 24). 81. JO TOLLEBEEK, “Degeneratie, moderniteit en culturele verandering. Een Belgisch perspectief”, in JO TOLLEBEEK, GEERT VANPAEMEL & KAAT WILS (eds.), *Degeneratie in België (1860-1940)*, Leuven, 2003, p. 300. 82. “*Il est temps d’être prêt*” (LIEUTENANT-GÉNÉRAL MARÉCHAL, *En Garde! Organisation de la défense nationale*, Bruxelles, 1889, p. 3). 83. “*La Belgique, sous peine de déchéance, doit suivre l’exemple des autres puissances qui sont entrées dans la voie de transformation*” (LE MAJOR BEERNAERT, *Être ou n’être pas...*, p. 8).

was brought on by the French Revolution and equally outdated. Thus, the demand for personal military service was entirely in line with the needs of modern times<sup>84</sup>.

The demand for personal military service first sprung from the military necessity for a larger army and for more educated soldiers. Belgian recruits belonged to the lower classes, and apparently lacked the education required to operate new weapons, which demanded technical knowledge. Important as they may have been, these military benefits were slowly crowded out by the social advantages of personal military service throughout the campaigns. Militaristic writers were not always that attentive to the social role of the army. In 1873, a militaristic writer responded with a shrug to the comment of the Liberal leader Walthère Frère-Orban that the Prussian system (with universal conscription) was less democratic than the organization of the Belgian army. "It doesn't matter whether an army is democratic or not; it is more important to know if it is well organized and ready for war"<sup>85</sup>. This line of argumentation changed considerably over the course of the militaristic campaigns. Seventeen years later, a militaristic writer argued: "If a reform is required, I think it should be democratic from head to toe"<sup>86</sup>. The violent workers' strikes and riots and

the strong democratic demands of the progressive Liberals and Socialists prompted the militaristic advocates to discuss the army's democratic and social value. The militarists fought against the image of the army as an insular institution, and discussed how to integrate the armed forces into society. "[The army] is not a state in the State anymore and the spirit that drives it should be no other than the patriotic spirit and not a spirit of caste. The army should be *nationalized* and the whole nation should scrutinize every detail"<sup>87</sup>. These arguments reveal a willingness of the militarists to broaden the position of the military in Belgian society. Anti-militarists pictured the army as the exact opposite of the bourgeois and democratic nation, and militaristic writers challenged this idea in brochures and articles. They argued that the army was not only the protector, but also was quintessentially the Belgian nation.

The militarists expanded this line of thought. According to them, the condition of the military and the construction of the nation were completely intertwined. An improved army was destined to be the engine of social change. The army would serve the nation-state by enhancing political union, a necessity for the state to survive. "In a society like ours, with so many seeds of disunity, it is a

**84.** LOUIS NAVEZ, *Pourquoi la Belgique...*, p. 52. **85.** "Il ne s'agit pas de savoir si une armée est démocratique, il s'agit plutôt de savoir si elle est bien organisée et apte à la guerre" [[ANONYMOUS], *Les adversaires du service obligatoire mis au pied du mur. Réponse à MM. Frère, Pirmez, Dumortier et Hymans (extrait de La Belgique Militaire)*, Bruxelles, 1873, p. 30].

**86.** "Si une réforme s'impose, j'estime qu'elle doit être démocratique des pieds à la tête" (UN VIEUX MONSIEUR. EX-FANTASSIN DE L'ARMÉE BELGE, *Ni Noir, Ni Allemand, ni Française, ni Suisse. Belge, uniquement Belge*, Bruxelles, 1890, p. 16). **87.** "Ce n'est plus un état dans l'État et l'esprit qui l'anime ne doit être autre que l'esprit patriotique et non un esprit de caste. L'armée doit être nationalisée et la nation entière doit en scruter minutieusement tous les détails" [CAPITAINE DEMASY (du 1er Chasseurs à Pied), *La véritable Armée Nationale*, Bruxelles, 1886, p. 10].

matter of social existence"<sup>88</sup>. Personal service and intensive education would make the upper classes manlier and the lower classes more civilized. Living together in barracks would enhance brotherly love between all Belgians, and erase class differences. From 1886 onwards, this was an explicit militaristic goal, and it was represented as one of the main reasons for the introduction of personal military service. The upper classes were warned that their possessions should not be solely protected by the poor. Their participation in the army would render them more manly and virile. The lower classes would be morally regenerated through army service, and would act in a more civilized and less hostile way towards the upper classes. This could only be achieved if the possibility of paying a replacement to fulfill one's military service was abolished. The militarists developed a threefold line of argumentation against this system. Firstly, buying your way out of barracks was considered unpatriotic, because it conflicted with the idea of the army as an honorable civic duty. Secondly, the system was considered morally unjust and undemocratic. The iniquitous nature of the system provided the Socialists with political ammunition to aim at the army and the wealthy it allegedly defended. Depriving the Socialist Party of one of their main points of opposition would considerably lessen proletarian support for the party. The implementation of personal military service was thus represented as an electoral

strategy against growing Socialist political strength. Thirdly, the replacement soldiers poisoned garrison life and the minds of their fellow soldiers. They were considered as "for the most part vicious men without morals", mercenaries incapable of leading a decent life outside the barracks<sup>89</sup>. For the militarists, and especially the officers among them, the replacements were also a convenient scapegoat for external criticism in the regular reports of abuses and poor living conditions in the barracks. The officers pointed to the corrupt element of the replacements as the reason for any internal dysfunctioning of the military. In an army with personal military service, the deviant influence of the lowest classes and the Socialists would be compensated for by the civilizing guidance of the wealthy. This would be complemented with a military emphasis on the physical and mental advancement of Belgian males. Since the 1870s, the army had provided a basic education that exceeded traditional military training in its aims and content. Military physicians battled alcoholism and venereal diseases, the physical symptoms of moral degeneration<sup>90</sup>. In addition, the army increasingly emphasized the moral and patriotic education of its soldiers. Officers noted, however, that Belgian soldiers proved especially resilient towards patriotic feelings. Nonetheless they continued with their plan for improving Belgian manhood. "The more difficult our task, the more devoted we should be to giving to the soldiers and

88. "Dans une société comme la nôtre, où existent tant de germes de désunion, c'est une question d'existence sociale" (LE MAJOR BEERNAERT, *Être ou n'être pas...*, p. 8). 89. "Mauvais drôle pour la plupart hommes sans moralité, vicieux" (GÉNÉRAL GOETHALS, *Du service obligatoire...*, p. 6). 90. LIESBET NYS, "De grote school van de natie. Legerartsen over drankmisbruik en geslachtsziekten in het Belgisch leger", in JO TOLLEBEEK, GEERT VANPAEMEL & KAAAT WILS (eds.), *Degeneratie in België...*, p. 86.

returning to the state the virile virtues that they are losing"<sup>91</sup>.

The idea of the regeneration of the people through army service was not new, but originated in the "nation in arms" concept that was a product of the French Revolution<sup>92</sup>. Shortly afterwards, Prussia justified its new recruitment system as not only necessary for the state's defense, but also as a means of social integration and cultural socialization of the soldier-citizen<sup>93</sup>. France followed suit after its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), and reinforced the idea of the army as a school of the nation and producer of manly citizens<sup>94</sup>. The integration of democratic values within a military culture, and the military as protector of democracy was spelled out in the influential French study *L'Armée et la Démocratie* (1885)<sup>95</sup>. This work was referred to as an inspiration by Belgian militarists<sup>96</sup>. Militaristic lobby organizations such as the British *National Service League* (1905-1914) and the Dutch *Vereniging Volkswaerbaarheid*

(1898-1914) harbored very similar ambitions in regard to the army's regenerating influence on society<sup>97</sup>.

Although their ideas about the societal role of the military were inspired by international developments, Belgian militarists emphasized and developed throughout their campaigns a so-called typically Belgian outlook on military matters. From 1886 onwards, the militarists evaluated the coherence of different recruitment systems to the Belgian national character. This debate on the Belgian way of militarizing, was closely connected to the nationalist construction of *une âme belge*, a national Belgian spirit<sup>98</sup>. The Belgian *âme militaire* was meant to be modest but defensive. The militarists depicted the Belgians as a gentle, peace-loving people that had proven to be fierce warriors when their freedom was in jeopardy. In agreement with this supposedly national character, they proposed a defensive army, that would delay and weaken a possible invader. Personal military service was the only

91. "Plus notre tâche est difficile, plus nous devons nous y consacrer, pour donner au soldat et rendre à la nation les vertus viriles qu'elle est en train de perdre" (Conférence donnée aux officiers du 1er régiment de Chasseurs à pied le 14 janvier 1899 par le Lieutenant Deglimes. Suivie des discours prononcés sur sa tombe le 5 Octobre 1899, Marchienne-au-Point, 1899, p. 13). 92. ALAN FORREST, "La patrie en danger : The French Revolution and the first levée en masse", in DANIEL MORAND & ARTHUR WALDRON (eds.), *The People in Arms : Military myth and national mobilization since the French Revolution*, Cambridge, 2003, p. 20-21. 93. UTE FREVERT, *A nation in barracks. Modern Germany, military conscription and civil society*, London, 2004, p. 47. 94. HENK WESSELING, *Soldaat en krijger. Franse opvattingen over leger en oorlog aan de vooravond van de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Amsterdam, 1988. 95. ÉTIENNE MALY, *L'Armée et la Démocratie*, Paris, 1885, p. 227. 96. UN OFFICIER GÉNÉRAL, *Le service personnel. Réponse à Monsieur Woeste*, Bruxelles, 1887, p. 7. 97. R. ADAMS, "The National Service League and mandatory service in Edwardian Britain", in *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1985, p. 53-74. The Dutch militaristic lobby groups are especially worthy of closer examination, as the geo-political position and army structure of the Netherlands were very similar to the Belgian situation. Next to that, Belgian militarists established contacts with their Dutch counterparts and were keen observers of the debates on military matters in the Netherlands (BEN SCHOEMAKER, *Burgerzin en soldatengeest. De relatie tussen volk, leger en vloot 1832-1914*, Amsterdam, 2009; HENK TE VELDE, *Gemeenschapszin en plichtsbeseef. Liberalisme en nationalisme in Nederland, 1870-1918*, Amsterdam, 1992). 98. ERIK DEFOORT, *Het Belgisch nationalisme...*, p. 225.

system deemed suitable for the elevation of the Belgian character.

***Un Vœu National. A successful militaristic construction?***

Between 1870 and 1914, the militarists became an emerging political lobby group. As shown above, they constructed a discourse of existential (internal and external) threats to the Belgian nation-state. Security rhetoric makes a societal challenge existential, thus overpowering all other political topics. The militarists attempted to take these threats outside the realm of normal political decision-making by pointing to the urgency of the army reforms for securing the safety of Belgium. The most explicit demand to take extraordinary measures in the handling of military matters was made by the demonstrators on 13 June 1897. The 149 militarists featured in the special edition of *L'Étoile Belge* collectively asked parliament to vote for the abolition the system of replacement soldiers immediately and independently of other military reforms. The militarists asked the government to consult the Belgian people on military matters that concerned their existence. They pointed out that Belgians were militaristic at heart, but that they were being misled.

It is quite clear that army officers and a growing number of Liberal politicians attempted to securitize external and internal potential threats in order to push forward their army reform plans. The crucial and more complicated question is whether they

succeeded. To what extent were the basic militaristic notions, both threats and solutions, adopted by the public? Was the solution to the threat accepted or rejected<sup>99</sup>? The audience of the securitizing act is of course less tangible than its initiator. The militaristic lobby explicitly addressed the whole nation, but the nature of their writings suggests that their target audience was the political class and the electorate. Between 1871 and 1897, militaristic writers explicitly aimed at the political class, and their anti-militaristic adversaries amongst that group. The anti-militarists, Paul Janson (progressive Liberal) and Charles Woeste (Catholic), were personally addressed in many pamphlets. From 1893 onwards, with the adoption of suffrage with graded votes, they focused in addition on the new electoral audience. This was connected to their argument that the public was being misinformed by anti-militaristic politicians, who were led by electoral rather than patriotic motives. The militarists contradicted these “wrong ideas on patriotic duties” that were propagated to the Belgian people<sup>100</sup>. At the same time, they expanded the militaristic means of communication. In the first twenty years of campaigning, militarists communicated with the public through pamphlets and articles. From 1890 onwards, they also disseminated their ideas through demonstrations, speeches, plays, pamphlets, and postcards. These militaristic initiatives to distribute their beliefs to a wider public make a further analysis of their discourse all the more relevant. In this article, however, I

99. MARK B. SALTER, “When securitization fails. The hard case of counter-terrorism programs”, in THIERRY BALZACQ, *Securitization Theory. How security problems emerge and dissolve*, New York, 2011, p. 120. 100. “Des fausses idées sur les devoirs patriotiques” (LOUIS NAVEZ, *Pourquoi le Belgique...*, p. 30).



*The Catholic Minister of War (1912-1917) and Prime Minister (1911-1918) Charles de Broqueville (1860-1940) implemented universal military service in 1913. (KADOC, Louvain)*



*Paul Hymans (1865-1941), Liberal Member of Parliament (1900-1941) and advocate for universal military service and army investments. (Liberaal archief, Ghent)*

will initiate a deeper examination by focusing on the shifting views of the militaristic threats and solutions by the main ideological families in Belgium. This analysis is merely a starting point and, hopefully, a stimulus for future research on the reception of the top-down efforts of militarization.

There was a shift in the ruling political class between 1870 and 1914. Between the distinct refusal to adopt any military reforms in 1872 and the initiative of a non-military Catholic Minister of War to install universal service in 1913, Belgium got, in the words of French poet and pacifist Remy de Gourmont, “drunk at the dirty cask of militarism”<sup>101</sup>. Throughout the militaristic campaigns, the position on the military organization of the different political groups changed considerably. By 1889, it had become commonly accepted that Belgium was exposed to great threats and that the military structure was not strong enough to withstand both internal and external dangers. From 1900 onwards, the militaristic construction of both internal and external threats was broadly agreed; their solutions for guaranteeing an ever less-secure Belgium safety, however, were not. Although the majority of the political class agreed that a reform of military structures was long overdue, they differed considerably on its reorganization.

An internally divided Liberal Party initially expressed very little support for military

investment and a renewal of the army structure. Between 1870 and 1886, the strong anti-militaristic Frère-Orban ensured party discipline on this matter. In 1887 after Parliament turned down the d’Oultremont Plan (that proposed personal military service), many Liberals expressed their support for the militaristic cause. The Brussels progressive *Association libérale* and the doctrinaire *Ligue Libérale* became fellow militaristic campaigners, and participated in the demonstration of 13 June 1897. The Liberals still harbored a critical attitude towards Belgium’s military culture, but were advocates of personal military service and an increase in the defense budget<sup>102</sup>. Especially the “doctrinaires” made these militaristic causes one of their main points of opposition, while the progressive wing harbored pacifists. The unjust nature of the lottery system that allowed replacements, however, made them pressurize the Catholic government to implement army reforms. The liberal journal *Revue de Belgique* became a forum for militaristic writers. Between 1870 and 1914, it published 64 articles on the military question. From 1900 onwards, the Liberal Party presented itself as the mouthpiece of national public interest, opposing narrow ideological or class interests, a rhetoric that shared many similarities with that of the militarists<sup>103</sup>. A strong nationalist core group joined forces with the militarists in *La Ligue de la Défense Nationale*<sup>104</sup>. Nationalist discourse, however,

**101.** “Car le Belgique est en train de s’enivrer à l’outré malpropre du militarisme” (REMY DE GOURMONT, *Épilogues : réflexions sur la vie 1895-1898*, Paris, 1903, p. 229). **102.** Plank III of the program of the Liberal Congress on 8 and 9 April 1894 pertained to the military, and asked for the abolition of replacement and the adoption of personal military service. **103.** SOPHIE DE SCHAEFDRIJVER, *De Groote Oorlog...*, p. 21. **104.** ÉRIK DEFOORT, *Het Belgisch nationalisme...*, p. 527.



with its strong emphasis on expansionism and colonialism, was more hawkish and radical in nature than the “traditional” militaristic discourse.

The Catholics, in power from 1884 to 1914, were without doubt the most avid and powerful antagonists of the militarists. This does not imply that they did not reckon Belgium to be in danger. The Catholic anti-militarists, personified by Charles Woeste, interpreted Belgium’s neutral status differently to the militarists. To them, the *âme belge* was in essence anti-militaristic, as shown by the Peasants’ War (1798), of which the French conscription laws were one of the causes. They argued that setting up a large and expensive military would be of no use, because it would still be outnumbered and inadequate against the French or German armies. A strong investment in armament would provoke Belgium’s powerful neighbors, and would therefore be a violation of its neutrality. With the slogan “No forced soldiers”, the Catholic majority favored the system of a voluntary army. For that reason, the Catholic government had taken measures to stimulate the popularity of military service, including a shorter service term, better pay, and more leave. In addition, the Catholics set up a network of local soldiers’ organizations, in which young men were prepared for military service. The purpose was not necessarily for more effective war preparation, but to minimize the impact of the immoral and anti-clerical garrison life<sup>105</sup>. These local networks paradoxically

led to a monopoly of Catholic militarization on the ground. This was not immediately translated into a more militaristic policy. On the contrary, the rural Catholic electoral base, which had become more prominent since the electoral reforms of 1893, were zealous anti-militarists, and opposed all increases in the military budget. The implementation of the voluntary system in 1902 was a concession to their demands. Nevertheless, the Catholics fundamentally altered their views on military investment and reform on the eve of the First World War. This was not solely attributed to the Catholic leader, Charles de Broqueville. Cardinal Mercier, Frans Schollaert, and the student magazine *L’Universitaire Catholique* became strong and outspoken supporters of universal service.

The Socialists fiercely challenged the inequity of the recruitment system and the harsh living conditions in barracks. The Socialist Party developed its own alternative to the loathed army service. They proposed *La Nation Armée*, developed by the progressive Liberal Georges Lorand in a pamphlet (1889) of the same name<sup>106</sup>. The “armed nation” was loosely based on the Swiss military model and implied a short military training for every male citizen, without a long stay in the garrison<sup>107</sup>. Despite strong anti-militaristic Socialist actions, there was a reconciliation between the *Belgian Workers’ Party* and former soldiers’ groups, who had declared their support for universal suffrage and shared the Socialist aversion to the lottery system<sup>108</sup>. This ‘Socialist militarism’

**105.** ÉMILE WANTY, *Le milieu militaire...*, p. 245. **106.** GEORGES LORAND, *La nation armée. Le système suisse*, Bruxelles, 1889, p. 66. **107.** This became the official Socialist party line after the Socialist Congress in 1896. **108.** MAARTEN VAN GINDERACHTER, *Het Rode Vaderland. De vergeten geschiedenis van de communautaire spanningen in het Belgische socialisme voor WO I*, Tiel, 2005, p. 167.

prompted pacifist members (of the Mechelen and Ghent divisions of the *Socialist Youth Watch*) to step out of the Socialist organization and join the anarchist Free Revolutionary Labor Party<sup>109</sup>.

The exceptional collaboration between the Liberal Paul Hymans, the Socialist Emile Vandervelde, and the Catholic Charles de Broqueville to implement universal service in the spring of 1913, was a direct result of the internalization of militaristic ideas and solutions in the three main Belgian parties. The assessment of the immediate influence of the militaristic lobby on this process has proven to be a challenging task. The increasing influence on society of militaristic worldviews was considerably stimulated by facilitating conditions<sup>110</sup>. Facilitating conditions are those external and internal factors that increase the chances of a securitization action being successful. The main internal facilitating factor was the increasing social capital of the initiator of militaristic policies. The militarists set themselves up as specialists on military matters, and demanded in brochures, press campaigns, and in parliament to be consulted as experts. Their political credibility grew substantially through Liberal support. A second external facilitating condition was growing international tension, the hawkish German discourse aimed at Belgium, and the growing alarmism in the press. This was not a typically Belgian phenomenon. The same developments occurred in the French, British, and German media and have been interpreted

as indicators of militarization<sup>111</sup>. International diplomatic incidents and the arms races, commentaries by foreign diplomats and military attaches, and doom-laden press reports were all additional factors that scared and pressurized the Belgian public and political elite into increasing their armament.

#### IV. Conclusion

The statement that Belgium was militarized before the First World War would be greeted by contemporaries with howls of derision. It has always been presumed that prior to 1914, Belgium had made no serious attempt to strengthen its military position and infrastructure. Moreover, the common assumption that the Belgian people were unreservedly anti-militaristic has never before been put to the test. Instead, historical research has relied on the idea of an unbridgeable gap between military and civilian domains. This article does not ask whether or not Belgium was a militaristic state. Instead, it looks into a series of political initiatives to militarize Belgium in the late nineteenth century, and the effect these initiatives had on political culture. It is a first attempt to set out a new analytical course in the study of peacetime civil-military relations. Analyzing militarizing processes, disconnected from the physical preparation for war, but as a complex societal dialogue, engaging military, civilian, and political actors, allows us to identify aspects of militarization that previously remained hidden. A thorough

109. JAN MOULAERT, *Rood en zwart. De anarchistische beweging in België*, Leuven, 1995, p. 198-199. 110. BARRY BUZAN, JAAP DE WILDE & OLE WAEVER, *Security...*, p. 4. 111. GEOFFREY BEST, *The militarization of European society...*, p. 23.

review of the activities of the militaristic lobby uncovers that the military as an institution was not at all isolated from the rest of society and that Belgian militarists managed to leave a significant mark on the national attitude towards military affairs.

The militaristic lobby is an excellent starting point for the study of Belgian militarization. As one of the main voices in the civil-military debate, the evolution of its discourse and the discussion it provoked, provides us with a fresh insight into Belgium's militaristic mindset. Notwithstanding their political failure, until 1909, to jump-start actual preparations for war, the militaristic campaigns are an exemplary case of Belgian elite-level militarization. With each new campaign, the military establishment was increasingly successful in recruiting prominent individuals with no military background to take action for their cause. Throughout their 45 years of campaigning, the militarists reached out to civilian leaders, greatly expanded their reach, and gradually gained more support. This resulted in context-driven collaborations between unlikely political allies. The collaboration between military and civilian actors encouraged a two-way transfer of ideas. The militarists extended the traditional military-strategic function of the army to include a societal mission of protecting and improving the nation's character and identity. "Civilian" ideas about democratic values, moral regeneration, and social equity became an integral part of how they perceived the army's role in society. Conversely, the lobbyists succeeded in convincing a large part of the public of the truth of the basic militaristic notions: that Belgium suffered multiple threats to

its very existence; and that reforming the military was the only way to safeguard the state's survival. A similar development, in which an increasingly 'civilized' army coincides with the militarization of society, has been observed in France and Germany. The absence of universal conscription and a strong call to arms strengthened the assumption that Belgium was not affected by such developments. This article argues that Belgium was indeed the scene of an increasingly influential militaristic force that steadily gained ground in the years leading to the First World War. The intense interaction between military and civilian domains that resulted, gave way to a mutual exchange of ideas that had a profound effect on the civilian attitude towards military affairs. At the same time, it decidedly increased civilian political influence in military affairs. This bridging of the gap between the military and civil sphere remained largely hidden behind the face of an anti-militaristic, peaceful Belgium when compared to its neighbors; yet it is precisely this dynamic that helps to explain the swiftness and determination with which Belgians took up arms in 1914.

This review of militarization in Belgium takes a first step towards a more profound analysis of the validation and normalization of militaristic constructions that, prior to the First World War, nurtured the army's insatiable appetite for more resources. The gradual normalization of militaristic values in the national political sphere is merely a starting point for further research. In order to grasp pre-war militarization in its full complexity, this national analysis should be complemented by research on the local

agents of militarization (for example the scouts, soldiers' organizations, and sports events) and transnational dynamics (such as diplomatic incidents and encounters, international press reports, and contacts with similar militaristic lobby organizations). This examination of elite-level national militarizing efforts has indeed shown that the tentacles of militarization ran deep, and reached across all levels of society.

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