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# Warfare 1914-1918 (Belgium)

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**Between August 1914 and November 1918 the Belgian army took part in the First World War against the German aggressor. This article describes the way the Belgian army fought this war that began disastrously for Belgium, with 95 percent of the territory being occupied within three months. Despite a strong and widespread collective will to liberate the country, the military strategy remained on the defensive until August-September 1918. Meanwhile the Belgian army had - like all armies in conflict – learned to master modern warfare.**

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## Introduction

The Belgian military campaign of 1914 nearly turned into a disaster. The Germans could only be stopped after three months in a far corner of Belgium. This contribution aims to explain how the Belgian army transformed into a more effective army by 1918. The article begins with an examination of the situation in 1914 before discussing the Grand and Military Strategy of 1914-1918. The article then turns its focus to the tactical level of trench warfare. The article finishes with some considerations over the number of [casualties](#).

## A Disastrous Start in 1914

From 4 August 1914 onwards, German invasion troops were fighting their way through Belgium in a race towards Paris according to their plan of attack; the famous Schlieffen-Moltke-Plan. They were hardly opposed by the Belgian army although two fortified cities lying in the path of the German main effort, Namur and especially Liège, tried in vain to halt the German advance. The last fortresses in Liège and Namur surrendered on 16 and 25 August 1914, respectively.<sup>[1]</sup> The courageous fighting in Liège gave Belgium the nicknames “Poor” and “Brave Little Belgium”. The German [atrocities](#) reinforced this international sympathy. In the first three months of the war, German troops killed some 6,000 Belgian civilians and sacked many villages and the city of Louvain (Leuven) as revenge for what they wrongly thought were “franc-tireurs”.

The reason for this Belgian failure was quite evident: the Belgian army was not ready for war. It was too small (some 200,000 men out of a population of some 7.7 million<sup>[2]</sup>) and it was in the process of being completely reorganized.<sup>[3]</sup> Moreover, it was badly trained, poorly equipped (for example, the Field Army possessed only 120 heavy [machine guns](#) and no heavy [artillery](#) pieces at all,<sup>[4]</sup>) and lacked a clear doctrine.<sup>[5]</sup> Finally, as many as five different sets of [war plans](#) existed at the outbreak of the war without a consensus on which plan would be adopted.<sup>[6]</sup> All of the proposed plans were nevertheless in agreement on one point: the three fortified cities - Liège, Namur and Antwerp - would be manned (in total some 80,000 men).

The Belgian military campaign of 1914 was therefore largely improvised. Since 1839, Belgium was bound by the Independence Treaty that prescribed obligatory [neutrality](#). However this neutrality was armed (Belgium was allowed to have an army) and it was guaranteed by the Great Powers of 1839: [Great Britain](#), [France](#), [Russia](#), Austria and Prussia.<sup>[7]</sup> The strategic foundation of this improvised campaign was clearly defensive: the Field Army units (117,000 men) were positioned in the centre of the country along a small river (the Gete) where they would wait for reinforcements from the nearest “Guarantors”, France and Great Britain. Here they posed a serious threat to the German right flank. Minor German attacks were sufficient to throw the Belgian Field Army back to the *réduit national* (national Redoubt) of Antwerp on 20 August 1914. After the Battle of the Marne (6-9 September 1914), the Germans concentrated their troops on Antwerp.<sup>[8]</sup> From October 1914 on, the city was besieged but the Germans could not line up enough troops to surround the city, allowing the Belgian

Field Army to escape westwards with most of its troops.<sup>[9]</sup> In the chaos some 33,000 Belgian soldiers crossed the Belgo-Dutch border where they were locked up in internment camps according to [international law](#). Some 20,000 others were taken as [prisoners of war](#)<sup>[10]</sup>.

A few weeks later the same German troops attacked the Belgian (Field) Army on its new defensive position in the northwest corner of Belgium behind a small river that would become legendary in [Belgian collective memory](#), the fifteen to twenty metre wide Yser-river. Here the Belgian army, supported by British vessels firing from the North Sea and backed up by French units, would at last bring the German advance to a halt during the [Battle of the Yser](#) in 18 October – 10 November 1914.<sup>[11]</sup>

## The Belgian Strategy in Trench Warfare

### Grand Strategy

The key player in determining the Grand Strategy was [Albert I, King of the Belgians \(1875-1934\)](#). According to a historical tradition, and despite resistance from politicians and some generals who interpreted the Constitution differently,<sup>[12]</sup> Albert immediately assumed the function of commander-in-chief on 2 August 1914.<sup>[13]</sup> This gave him an even greater role in directing the Grand Strategy than he already had as president of the Council of Ministers.

The Grand Strategy was based on Belgium's neutrality. From the King's point of view, Belgium was at war with [Germany](#) and Austria-Hungary, but Belgium had to remain "neutral" in the war between Germany on the one hand and France and Great Britain on the other hand. Belgium considered itself a victim of a war between the Great Powers. Therefore the King refused to consider himself and his army an ally to the French and British (he preferred to use the term "Guarantors"), although this was de facto what was happening on the battlefield where Belgian, British and French soldiers fought side by side against the Central Powers.

The restoration of Belgian sovereignty, including reparations for the war damage, and the liberation of the Belgian territory were therefore the main objectives of the Belgian Grand Strategy. Some politicians also aimed for a territorial expansion but the King refused to subscribe to this claim. Finally, we should note that the [Belgian Parliament](#) did not play any significant role during the war since most members of Parliament stayed in [occupied Belgium](#) or fled abroad and Parliament therefore did not gather during the war.<sup>[14]</sup>

### Military Strategy

Until the summer of 1918 the King and his most important military advisor, [Emile Galet \(1870-1940\)](#), did not believe that the Germans could be beaten on the battlefield. He therefore decided that the Belgian army would apply a defensive military strategy and would only take part in large-scale

offensive operations on two conditions. Firstly, victory had to be probable or even sure. Secondly, the operations had to serve Belgian war aims.<sup>[15]</sup> The King was also afraid that military operations on Belgian territory would devastate the country.<sup>[16]</sup>

Again, not everybody agreed. Some Belgian ministers and generals were more eager to attack. French and British political and military leaders tried several times to integrate the Belgian army into their respective armed forces.<sup>[17]</sup> Despite the enormous pressure and even hostile campaigns in foreign newspapers, the King did not give in. As a result, the Belgian army had no choice but to maintain a defensive military strategy for four years.

The royal assumption to attack only when the chances for success were high enough was based on the harsh reality of 1914. The army had barely survived the Battle of the Yser in October 1914. Troops had lost weapons, munitions and equipment; thousands of men had been wounded, killed or missing in action and units had been mixed up. The army basically had to be rebuilt. Moreover, the army was confronted with a series of deficiencies that were difficult to overcome.

Firstly, there was a shortage of manpower since the largest part of Belgium was occupied by the Germans. Apart from the 50,000 war volunteers and the 18,000 hastily mobilized men of the incomplete class of 1914, only some 60,000-65,000 more men could be mobilized even after decreeing several new mobilization laws.<sup>[18]</sup> The Belgian government also decided not to bring colonial troops from Congo to Belgium.<sup>[19]</sup> The Belgian army simply could not survive a battle of attrition such as in Verdun or the Somme (1916). Finally, it is worth noticing that Belgium never turned to the “mechanical solution” for its shortage in manpower: the Belgian army never possessed tanks during the First World War.

Secondly, there were serious shortcomings in equipment, weaponry and munitions. At the outbreak of the war, the Field Army for instance did not possess any indirect fire capacity, and it soon became obvious that the 348 75mm Krupp guns<sup>[20]</sup> were not always effective in trench warfare. To solve this problem, the Belgian government created a war industry in Great Britain and France. It also relied on France and Great Britain for weapon deliveries, but the Belgian army was not a priority to these countries. Belgium therefore often received used or old-fashioned weapons and airplanes. Another solution was the use of captured German weaponry.<sup>[21]</sup>

To avoid a rift, the King did make some concessions to the French and British. With every large scale offensive on the Western Front, he ordered the Belgian army to launch a series of “demonstrations” to make the Germans believe that a Belgian attack was imminent. These demonstrations were very diverse and could include raiding, artillery shelling or simply the firing of infantry rounds. Aside from these demonstrations, several smaller units such as workers’ companies and artillery units were temporarily sent to reinforce British and French troops. Another way to give the French and British a hand was by expanding the Belgian front line to free French or British troops who could then take part in their own offensives. Between November 1914 and the

summer of 1918 the Belgian frontline was expanded from eleven to thirty-eight kilometers.<sup>[22]</sup> Finally, the Belgian General Staff worked out several large offensive operations for the Belgian army, which is an action that they also planned to take in 1915, 1916 and 1917.<sup>[23]</sup> However, these operations were never carried out: the Belgian troops would only launch their operations once the breakthrough was realized elsewhere on the Western Front, and this did not happen.

## An Army in Transformation

The Belgian army of 1918 did not resemble that of 1914. It had completely transformed both on the outside (equipment, uniform, weaponry), as well as on the inside (organization, tactics, cooperation between arms). On the one hand, this transformation was restrained by several economic and political factors. For one, the fact that 95 percent of the territory was occupied and also the strained relationship Belgium had with France and Great Britain made things difficult. The transformation was stimulated by both the Germans and “Guarantors” whose ideas were copied by the Belgians, usually with some delay. While the Germans created for instance their first specialized assault units in 1915 and 1916, the Belgians copied them one or even two years later.<sup>[24]</sup> The same goes for the French and British weapons and tactics and even for [gas warfare](#); the first Belgian use of [gas](#) was only in the summer of 1917.<sup>[25]</sup>

### Refitting the Army. Defensive Thinking and Acting (1915-1916)

As already discussed above, the primary concern of the Belgian High Command was to turn the scattered units back into one army and to preserve the last piece of unoccupied Belgium. The easiest way to hold a defensive position was to construct trenches protected by [barbed wire](#) and other obstacles. Trenches were built up from the ground with sandbags, since the level of groundwater was extremely high. Later on, that line of trenches was backed up by other trenches and these were connected by communication trenches, [camouflaged](#) and equipped with depots, etc. These numerous field works were the main occupation of the soldiers in 1915 and even 1916.

Although soldiers on average spent only one day out of three in the trenches their daily lives were hard. The soldiers’ low pay did not compensate for the material deprivations that they experienced: cold, wetness, hunger, thirst, diseases, etc. The psychological challenges were huge; the threat of a stray bullet or a round of artillery fire was constant, while the separation from their families in occupied Belgium didn’t make life easier. Morale went up and down.<sup>[26]</sup> A system of recreation, cultural activities, sports and shops was organized to compensate for these difficulties.<sup>[27]</sup> Despite these efforts, some 5,000 dissatisfied Flemish soldiers joined the clandestine *Frontbeweging*, a group claiming more rights for the Flemish-speaking population, which complicated matters because French was the official language of the military administration, command and control and training.<sup>[28]</sup> Moreover Flemish soldiers were overrepresented in the army, in particular in the infantry. The Flemish people made up 57 percent of the pre-war Belgian population, but 67 percent of the soldiers

between 1914-18 were Flemish.<sup>[29]</sup> Other factors that contributed to these difficult circumstances was the fact that the military leadership changed throughout the war, compounded by the fact that the soldiers were living closely together with their superiors.<sup>[30]</sup>

The refitting and reorganization of the Belgian army was not impeded by German hostile activities. This had a lot to do with the terrain held by the Belgian army at that time, which was not suitable for offensive operations. During the Battle of the Yser in October 1914, the Belgians had flooded large areas with seawater, and later rainwater.<sup>[31]</sup> After the battle, the Belgian High Command decided to maintain these inundations, and no German commander would consider a decisive attack through these areas; the crossing of the flat and flooded terrain would cause heavy casualties and the organization of the lines of communication through these flooded areas would be a nightmare. The Germans did, however, come to quickly understand how the inundations were organized and in turn used them to their defensive advantage.<sup>[32]</sup>

During these first years of the war, the traditional pre-war thinking continued to have an influence. Several orders repeated that soldiers should hold their ground at all costs (*défense à outrance*). The first line of trenches was stuffed with infantrymen, a strategy that reflected the linear tactical thinking that was dominant in 1914.<sup>[33]</sup> Also, the idea that a good morale was the best guarantee for success in combat was still omnipresent.<sup>[34]</sup> Another stubborn pre-1914 way of thinking that continued to have an influence was the belief in centralized command. This strategy relied on the assumption that a military commander wanted to keep as much visual control over his subordinates and weapons as possible. It would take difficult on-the-job learning by the Belgian military strategists to understand that these pre-war principles needed rethinking. Belgium was by no means an exception amidst the various other armies involved in conflict.

Trench warfare not only required another way of thinking, but more importantly, new weaponry and tactics, including a close cooperation between all arms and assets. Infantry and artillery had always been obliged to work together, but now this cooperation became crucial for success in both defensive and offensive operations. From 1915 onward, Belgian divisions received their first howitzers and trench mortars, which gave them indirect fire capacity.<sup>[35]</sup> On top of this, the infantry was equipped with [hand grenades](#), which up to this point had been a privilege reserved for the engineers.<sup>[36]</sup>

### **Defensive Acting and Offensive Thinking. Activate the Front (1917-1918)**

Only in the last months of 1916 did the Belgian infantry gradually start to receive new offensive weapons, including the offensive hand grenade (the French model O.F.), the French rifle grenade (Vivien-Bessières) and the French light machine gun (*fusil-mitrailleur Chauchat*). These weapons allowed the army to stop thinking about offensive warfare and to start training for it.

The second half of 1917 brought a change in trench warfare on the Belgian side. The new weaponry

coupled with a growing awareness that the Belgian army was no longer inferior to the German troops, led to the introduction of an “active front policy”, which involved artillery operations and raids against German positions intended to destroy their positions or to bring back prisoners of war. These raids required a high degree of coordination between aviation, artillery and infantry. High Command approved this new policy because they saw it as a step towards an upcoming planned offensive effort in support of the Third Battle of Ypres to take place in the summer of 1917.<sup>[37]</sup>

In the winter of 1917/1918 the Belgian army once again put all of their efforts on the defensive, anxiously awaiting a [German Spring Offensive](#). The attack took place on 17 April 1918 when three German divisions failed to break through the Belgian lines near Merkem.<sup>[38]</sup> The Belgians had implemented the French “defense-in-depth” system.<sup>[39]</sup> This proved to be successful although it is important to remember that the German artillery support was insufficient on this particular occasion. The defensive victory served as a confidence booster for the Belgian army, which had not seen any major operation since October 1914. The specialization of the infantry and artillery, and decentralization of infantry and artillery assets, who were no longer under visual control of their company commanders, had proven their value.

After this operation in April 1918 it never became calm again on the Belgian frontline. Between June and September 1918 some 650 German soldiers were taken [prisoner](#) during skirmishes and raids.<sup>[40]</sup>

### **Offensive Thinking and Acting (August – November 1918)**

In August 1918 the King eventually gave in to the French and British pressure. He and the army turned all their attention to an offensive military strategy. The King even accepted the creation of the “Army Group Flanders”, composed of the Belgian army (170,000 men) alongside British and French divisions. This collective was nominally under the King’s command, but in reality was directed and led by the French general [Jean-Marie Degoutte \(1866-1938\)](#).<sup>[41]</sup>

On 28 September 1918, ten out of twelve Belgian infantry divisions took off for their first offensive together with their French and British colleagues.<sup>[42]</sup> They were successful: between 28 September and 11 November 1918 the “Army Group Flanders” advanced some sixty kilometers despite fierce German resistance.

### **Casualties**

During the conflict 328,000 soldiers served in the Belgian army.<sup>[43]</sup> In total, 40,000 out of 328,000 did not survive the war: 26,000 died of their war injuries, while some 14,000 others died of diseases.<sup>[44]</sup> These figures, representing 12.2 percent of the army, represent a relatively high number of deceased than one might expect considering the overall defensive military strategy pursued by the Belgian troops. It even comes close to the percentage of [French](#) and [German](#) military casualties, which

were 16.8 and 15.4 percent, respectively<sup>[45]</sup>. What made Belgian casualties so unique, was the high rate of soldiers dying from disease. The flooded areas (due to the inundations) were extremely unhealthy. Like the army itself, the health services were completely transformed during the war. In 1914, they were barely organized and poorly equipped. In 1918 there was a clear evacuation chain, forward surgical posts, field hospitals and even institutions for mental diseases resulting from shell shock, where some 3,000 Belgian soldiers were examined during the war.<sup>[46]</sup>

## Conclusion

The Belgian war experience was similar to that of other belligerents: like other armies, the Belgian army had to learn to master **modern warfare**. Particular to the Belgian case was the army's defensive military strategy, the role of the King, the shortcomings in personnel, equipment, weaponry and munitions, and the fact that the army was cut off from the largest part of Belgian territory.

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