

Pre-war Military Planning (Belgium)

By [Christophe Bechet](#)

Following the Treaty of London in 1839, pre-war planning theories in Belgium oscillated between two positions: secure and defend endangered borders or create a powerful military stronghold in Antwerp. On the eve of the Great War, King Albert I and his chief of staff held opposing strategies for protecting Belgium. The King advocated a concentration of the army on the Meuse, where the Germans had completed fortifications in 1892, but the chief of staff ultimately selected a central position to secure his line of communication with Antwerp. The lack of a determined, standardized doctrine at the highest level of the army led to a mixed, compromised plan adopted hurriedly during initial mobilization in August 1914.

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Introduction

During World War Two (WWII), German occupants seized archives from the Belgian Ministry of War. 90 percent of these archives concerned World War I (WWI) and the years 1920-1930, but Germans also sent documents from the pre-war period, dating back to 1870 and earlier, to Berlin, where they were in turn taken by the Russians in 1945. In 2002, the “Moscow Archives” were

repatriated to the Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and Military History (MRA) in Brussels. The MRA's inventories during the last decade remain cursory due to the documents' haphazard journeys: pre-WWI documents were mixed with papers from the late 1930s. Some documents concerning the Belgian plans have been discovered recently^[1] but more may exist. With the help of military memoirs and diplomatic papers, the repatriated documents enable a synthetic approach to the theories and strategic thinking that prevailed at the army's highest level.

Theoretically, after the Treaty of London in 1839 Belgium should have allied herself with the "saviour", i.e. any foreign army that had not previously violated her borders. Nevertheless, numerous lawyers, officers, publicists and senior civil servants scrutinized this statement.^[2] Many questions remained unanswered: how to determine the true aggressor in case of a double and simultaneous invasion? Should the guarantors wait for a signal from Brussels before crossing the Belgian frontier? Would [neutrality](#) remain a principle of [international law](#) during the conflict or would helping guarantors evolve into Belgian "allies"? After the war, would not the welcomed "saviours" be seen as troublesome occupants? Unlike in [France](#) or [Germany](#), where war plans were relatively restrictive in the first days of operations, these ambiguities meant that [Belgium](#) did not create such official war plans. The First Directorate of Military Operations (Ministry of War) had to determine and summarize the different conflict scenarios and develop the Belgian army's "appropriate" reaction for each. The First Directorate's memos were communicated to the minister of war and to the chief of the Special Staff Corps.^[3] The two men represented the highest level of the army, under the king as commander in chief (CIC), who was supposed to have the last word.^[4] Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the Belgian monarchs [Leopold II, King of the Belgians \(1835-1909\)](#) and [Albert I, King of the Belgians \(1875-1934\)](#), would-be CICs in event of war, complained regularly about the lack of thorough and effective planning. Indeed, staff officers wrote numerous military memos, but they remained pure speculation or wishful thinking, never being translated into official implementable war plans or field operations directives. The first move was left to the prospective foe.

Behind "Protective" Walls

When Belgium became independent in 1830, her army inherited all the Dutch Barrier fortresses facing France, planned by [Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington \(1769-1852\)](#) in 1814-18. In spite of uneasiness during the Eastern crisis of 1839-40, France was not feared, as it was ruled by [Louis Philippe I, King of the French \(1773-1850\)](#), the Belgian king's father-in-law. In 1848, as the February Revolution in Paris turned things upside down, a military commission decided to dismantle a large number of the ancient fortresses and chose Antwerp as the government's last refuge in the event of invasion. At this time, the French Second Republic was seen as Belgium's principal danger. Four years later, the choice of Antwerp as the *réduit national* (Belgian nationality's last shelter) seemed especially justified after the birth of the Second Empire, which increased Belgium's suspicions of her southern neighbour. The creation of a great entrenched camp with fortifications surrounding the commercial city was proposed. After numerous debates in the Belgian Chambers, the necessary

budget was finally approved in August 1859 and the mammoth works were completed around 1865-66. From this moment on, the Belgian army had to keep a continuous link with Antwerp, which became its main depot. Due to the progress made by rifled [artillery](#), the entrenched camp became quickly an authentic barrel of the Danaids for the War Ministry's finances. In the years 1870, 1880 and 1890, it required more and more credit to finance improvements such as securing the left bank of the Scheldt or replacing bricks with concrete in the walls endangered by torpedo shells. Furthermore, the siege of Paris in 1870 had demonstrated the necessity of moving the first line of defence in order to prevent the city's shelling. Thus new detached forts had to be created at a distance from nine to sixteen kilometres. A new extension was approved in 1906 but had not yet been completed by 1914.^[5]

Another very actual problem subsequent to the army's concentration near Antwerp was the protection of the border areas. During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the Belgian army had to move to the extreme south of the country in the Luxemburg province. With the increasing hostility between France and Germany, it appeared that the nation's main risk was less a total invasion (involving thousands of men) than a mere crossing of Belgian territory by the two belligerents. In that case, in order to assume the duties of neutrality, the Belgian army would be compelled to advance far away from its central base to prevent the use of the strategic roads and railways. Thus as early as 1874, the military engineer [Alexis Brialmont \(1821-1903\)](#) started to secretly study the possibility of improving the main fortresses on the Meuse River: Liège and Namur.^[6] The new project was widely discussed in the early 1880s. It provoked a strong opposition from the liberal leader [Walthère Frère-Orban \(1812-1896\)](#) at the head of the government. According to him, the Meuse fortifications misinterpreted Belgium's traditional defence policy by disseminating soldiers and spending money on an eastern security line instead of grouping forces in the heart of the country. The project was postponed. Debates started anew in 1887. Frowning on the chauvinistic militarism of the French minister of war, General [Georges-Ernest-Jean-Marie Boulanger \(1837-1891\)](#), and fearing a French-German war provoked by the Schnaebelle incident, Belgian MPs approved the budgets in June 1887.^[7]

Paradoxically, this late vote was a bit of luck for Brialmont. It gave him enough time to modify his first plans, achieved in 1882, now including the effects of the torpedo shells recently experimented in Germany (1883) and France (1886). The result of his studies was an authentic revolution in the art of fortifying cities. Liège and Namur were to be surrounded by fortified belts containing twelve and nine forts, respectively, evenly spaced, helping each other by artillery cross fire, and thus rendering obsolete the old idea of a surrounding wall. The "Brialmont Forts" were isolated and half-buried to merge with landscape and cast in concrete. They were polygonal – triangular or four-sided – and positioned on culminating points, in order to control the different itineraries such as railways, bridges and valley roads. A substantial innovation placed the artillery under 360 degree rotating steel domed turrets, copied on the models designed four years earlier by Brialmont for the Rumanian forts at Bucharest.^[8] In the field of "Grand Strategy" the Meuse fortifications had a double function. First, Namur and Liège were considered the two "bolts" closing the doors of the Meuse corridor between

Northern France and Western Germany. Secondly, the two “places” on the Meuse had to facilitate the army’s movements from one bank to the other and control the bridges before the arrival of one or two rescue armies – French, English or German depending on its current status in the European struggle for hegemony.^[9]

Soldiers Without an Official War Plan

The Meuse forts were built in 1892 but their creation did not fundamentally change the theories concerning the behaviour the Belgian army should adopt in the early days of a war. It still had to mobilize itself in the central triangle Brussels – Leuven – Mechelen, south of Antwerp. After this first step, it had, depending on the belligerents’ movements, to occupy one of the twenty-two positions identified in peacetime, generally situated one or two stages from Brussels.^[10] It was difficult to predict which attitude the army would adopt. In 1891, Staff Corps Lieutenant Joseph Begrand (1856-1934) conducted a strategic study about the positions to be adopted by the army “in the event that the neutrality of Belgium would be violated by Germany.”^[11] Among the five scenarios analysed, the first and second foresaw a German path through the Ardennes, south of the Meuse; the third, fourth and fifth developed movement north of Liège, through the classical *trouée du Limbourg*. In all cases, the enemy took into account the new fortifications along the Meuse which were systematically bypassed. In a special chapter of his memo, Begrand studied the ideal concentration areas according to the five scenarios. In the third, fourth and fifth scenarios, he recommended either the “classic” triangle Brussels – Mechelen – Leuven or a quadrilateral Leuven – Aarschot – Diest – Tienen. The two positions afforded a good place to intercept German columns from Roermond, Maaseyck, Maastricht or Visé. On the other hand, the first and second scenarios created a tricky situation for the Belgian army. Even if it adopted the most western position towards Leuven – Tienen, it would reach the Meuse too late, after German outposts had reached the Franco-Belgian border. It is clear that Begrand was not convinced that the army’s central concentration was suited to all circumstances. The first part of Begrand’s work was well noted by his superiors Major Auguste Hamelryck (1844-1902) and Lieutenant Colonel Paul Chapelié (1840-1922). They considered that the five scenarios developed were complete. However, the second part was largely commented on in the margins because it criticized the “central position of concentration”, the official theory shared by the majority of staff officers.

Fundamentally, theory would not change ulterior works. On 5 March 1892, the Special Staff Corps chief, General Richard Brewer (1833-?), sent the minister of war a memo on the mobilisation. In this document, the scenarios were divided into two main cases: a full scale invasion or a mere crossing. Due to the fortification of the Meuse, Brewer thought that the belligerents would probably remain south of the Meuse valley. This scenario was studied at length in a further study sent to the minister of war on 31 January 1894. At this time, the Special Staff Corps chief identified several waiting positions in the province of Luxembourg. Like the commentators of Bregrand’s memo, Brewer recommended the use of railways if Belgian troops did not have time enough to reach the positions

by foot.^[12] The higher probability of a mere crossing of the Ardennes became clear in 1901 through the reports by a Belgian military commission established to reform the army. In his report to the commission members, the director of military operations, Colonel Georges Ducarne (1845-?), explained that a movement north of the Meuse would be too dangerous for Germany as it would be totally isolated from the main theatre of operations in [Alsace-Lorraine](#). Furthermore, to be entirely efficient, such an operation would require too many troops. On the contrary, a movement south of the Meuse would not meet such disadvantages and could use eight roads from Eupen to Trier, eight perfectly suitable ways to get over the “mythic Barrier” of the Ardennes.^[13]

In 1906 during the Tangier crisis, Ducarne, then chief of the Special Staff Corps, revealed to the English military attaché Colonel Nathaniel Barnardiston (1858-1919) the two positions to be adopted by Belgian troops in case of a German violation of Belgian neutrality. He distinguished the two traditional cases: a “coup-de-force” against Antwerp and a German advance through Belgian Luxembourg against the Upper Meuse. In the first case, Ducarne informed Barnardiston that a Belgian army of 100,000 men, concentrated on the fourth day near Brussels, could occupy a line roughly between Turnhout and Diest before the arrival of the Germans. The most effective way in which English troops could assist would be by detrainning a relief force between Leuven and Aarschot in order to support the Belgian right flank. In the second case, Ducarne’s report of 1901 was taken into account. The Belgian officer estimated that the German Army Corps could not cross the border between Eupen and Gouvy before the eighth day of mobilization. The Belgians would thus be ahead of them on the Meuse between Liège and Namur. To be of any help, British troops would have to reach the river between Namur and Dinant by the tenth day.^[14] Ducarne also told Barnardiston that the Liège and Namur garrisons could hold out for one month without any support.^[15]

On 26 June 1910, a royal decree instituted a General Army Staff (EMGA) with wider powers and duties. From that moment on, the management of the War School in Brussels and the First Directorate’s missions and offices were allocated to the new strengthened staff. The first army chief of staff was General Harry Jungbluth (1847-1930), very close to King Albert. He was strongly influenced by the heterodox theories of his main adviser Lieutenant Colonel Louis de Ryckel (1857-1922).^[16] Since the winter 1909-10, de Ryckel had been working on a general memorandum concerning Belgium’s defence, in which he proposed numerous innovations. The most important was to concentrate the Belgian field army near the endangered border. Indeed, de Ryckel supposed that, thanks to information communicated by Belgian diplomats, it would be possible to determine in advance who was going to be the enemy and thus quickly take an appropriate position.^[17] Significantly, the scenario against Germany took the main part of de Ryckel’s study. If Germany attacked Belgium, wrote de Ryckel, the country would defend itself. “If Germany disdains her, she would march towards Aachen.”^[18]

At the time of the Agadir crisis, an extraordinary meeting occurred on 16 September 1911. The Minister of Foreign Affairs Julien Davignon (1854-1916) and his main collaborators examined the

attitude Belgium would take in case of German violation of her neutrality. Prophetically, the high-ranking civil servants predicted that the Imperial Government would ask Belgium to allow the crossing of her territory by German troops. It seemed obvious that this request would be rejected. But then how was an eventual collaboration with France and Great Britain to be defined? According to the political director at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Léon Arendt (1843-1924), it was essential to avoid the occupation of Belgian forts by the French army or a British landing in Antwerp or Zeebrugge under the pretence of “protecting” Belgium. After the meeting, all participants expressed the wish that, in wartime, Belgium would conclude a preliminary agreement with the guarantors. Arendt received a mission to elaborate a memo to convince the government of the opportunity of that “Free Hands” policy. Arendt’s sixty-three-page manuscript was completed by the end of November 1911. Typewritten in several copies, it constituted an important working paper during the different councils held at the beginning of August 1914 by King Albert, his high-ranking generals and state ministers.^[19]

Naturally, the document was mainly devoted to political matters but included strategic elements. The army had been consulted and Arendt had at his disposal two military studies, one from the military operations director, General Major Benjamin Ceulemans (1852-1913); the other from the then Staff Corps Lieutenant Colonel de Ryckel. The latter was a part of the rather unorthodox memo written by de Ryckel in 1909-10. The first was more classical: Ceulemans enumerated nine working hypothesis which could be summarized in three scenarios concerning a German attack, either by the *trouée du Limbourg* (breach of Limbourg), the *trouée du Luxembourg* (breach of Luxembourg), or the two banks of the Meuse.^[20] Arendt’s reaction towards the two studies was very interesting. He considered unrealistic de Ryckel’s proposition to go on the offensive towards Aachen if German troops overlooked the Belgian army. Furthermore, the political director was disappointed not to discover any reference to the possibility of a French attack in the Hainaut or in the Flanders, in order to take Brussels.^[21] Indeed, since the end of the 19th century, Belgian staff officers had neglected the possibility of a French invasion.^[22] However, the ideological fear of republican agitation in the border area was certainly present in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Before 1914, Arendt was busy trying to set up some form of an intelligence service using the Belgian Consuls or ex-servicemen living in northern France.^[23]

1914: A “Poor Little” Army

During 1913, General Auguste de Ceuninck (1858-1935), army chief of staff, established a plan which scheduled the mobilisation of the six divisions in their own district, instead of the former triangle Brussels – Leuven – Mechelen. Afterwards, following de Ceuninck’s project, the divisions would be concentrated in Ath, Namur, Liège, Assche, Brussels and Leuven while the cavalry division would be near Ottignies. After this waiting period, according to the evident enemy, the army would be transported to the endangered border: to Liège against a German violation, to Namur or Ath against a French violation.^[24] The new plan was more “offensive” but, a few weeks before the war, on 25 May

1914, de Ceuninck was replaced by General chevalier Antonin de Selliers de Moranville (1852-1945) who was far more cautious. The second-in-command was then Colonel de Ryckel. The two men hated each other. Selliers de Moranville had the confidence of the civilian Minister of War de Broqueville but de Ryckel was supported by the king and his military adviser Captain Emile Galet (1870-1940). The royal adviser feared behaviour injurious to Belgian national pride if the German troops crossed Belgium through Luxembourg province, while second-rate units of the *Landwehr* would watch and “fix” the Belgian army concentrated beyond the Meuse.^[25] Thus Galet shared de Ryckel’s theories about the position of concentration. He thought that the best position to face a German aggression was the area of Liège and had just completed a work on this question during winter 1912-13.^[26] In his memories, Galet wrote: “... we were suspicious about Germany since a long time! We had a complete project of operations against her; whereas the project against France was just drafted.”^[27] According to him, the king fully shared his views.^[28]

On 1 August 1914, the Belgian mobilization started. Selliers de Moranville implemented a plan with a central position of concentration: 1st army division (DA) at Tienen; 5th DA at Perwez; 2nd DA at Leuven; 6th DA at Wavre; 4th DA near Namur; 3rd DA near Tongeren; and the cavalry division (DC) at Gembloux. Indeed, because of the Belgian army’s limited training, he feared being cut off from the *réduit national* of Antwerp. King Albert probably disapproved this plan. He would have preferred that the DA be put on war strength in their peacetime garrisons, waiting to know with certainty the would-be enemy.^[29] In a second scenario, in case of war with Germany, they would have been transported by train to a position of concentration on the Meuse, according to the study of his adviser Captain Galet and de Ryckel’s views. Nevertheless this plan could not be implemented, even after the transmission of the German ultimatum on 2 August 1914. The reason was purely technical: all the General Staff’s and Commission of Military Transport’s activity had been devoted to prepare the plan implemented in haste by Chief of Staff de Selliers. The commission, made up of civil and military elements, had been only informed on 29 July 1914 about the military projects. No railway transport plan had been established before.^[30] It could turn into a serious anarchy if the half-done work ended in the waste basket in order to concentrate the entire army on the Meuse. King Albert I opted for a “mixed” solution: the 3rd and 4th DA would stay at Liège and Namur. The others would be concentrated in a central position between the rivers Gette and Dyle, in the rough square Leuven – Tienen – Wavre – Perwez. The cavalry division would assemble in Gembloux.^[31]

On 4 August 1914, the Belgian army counted 234,000 men. One half was assigned to the fortresses and the rear services. The 117,000 men of the field army were divided in six DAs and one DC. Each DA had three or four infantry “Mixed Brigades” (each had two infantry regiments, one from the active army, one from called up reservists, one group of twelve 7c5 guns (Krupp model) and one mounted police platoon); one cavalry regiment; one artillery regiment with groups of 7c5 and 150 mm guns; military engineers; telegraphers; and services. The cavalry division consisted of two brigades (of two regiments); one battalion cyclists; one horse artillery regiment; military engineers; telegraphers; and services. The field army had only 100 machine guns. Before the war, several staff officers had

considered the Mauser 1889 rifle quality so good that they would not need machine guns. The aviation had about thirty aeroplanes –only sixteen of which could fly – and forty-five pilots. There was not any mobile heavy artillery. Last but not least, due to the reorganization of 1913 and the first steps of a general national service, the army was painfully lacking in officers: fewer than 5,000 were available for 234,000 men. Even proportioned to Belgian demography, the comparison with war effort in France or Germany – more than 3,800,000 men mobilized in each nation – is unbearable. The “dissuasive” theory of the Belgian army, standing watch behind its “protective” walls – now completely outdated by the new artillery – was no longer of any value. Up to the end of the nineteenth century, with French and German manpower and war material lower, the addition of the Belgian army to one of the belligerents could have changed the balance of forces. Now it was rather insignificant for France or Germany. Because of the pacifist opinion of the main part of its electorate, the Belgian Catholic Government (in power from 1884 to 1914) had waited too long to take the necessary steps. The military law of 1909 had established the personal service of one son for each family but the general military service was only approved in August 1913. If it had been adopted earlier, Belgium would have been able to mobilize 350,000 men. In such conditions, the crossing of the Belgian border would have been more dangerous.^[32] Indeed, German intelligence reports had noticed for a long time the political difficulties encountered by the Belgian Army to increase its forces.^[33] The Meuse fortifications were also reputed not to be fulfilled with sufficient garrisons, inter alia, to guard the gaps between the twenty-one isolated works of the two fortified belts of Liège and Namur.^[34]

The value of colonial forces was not better. Certainly, one could mention the 17,000 men of the Force Publique in Congo. However, the latter was just a Police Force headed in 1914 by 332 white officers and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs). Most of the troops were armed with old Albini rifles. Only troops in Katanga had Mausers. A few Maxim machine guns, Nordenfelt 4c7 cannons and Krupp 7c5 guns sustained the infantry. The Force Publique was not trained or equipped for a real war with Germans. It did not have a proper command structure above the company, nor logistics or plans for mobilisation or operations. It was forced into the defence at the beginning of the war.^[35]

Conclusion

It appears that Albert I, his adviser and numerous high-ranking officers were largely convinced of the probability of a German violation south of the Meuse. As a result, the aborted position of concentration ahead of Liège was partly influenced by the idea that the German Army Corps would not dare cross the Meuse. As with France, Belgium relied on diverse sources of information. For example, Albert I could have been informed by his brother-in-law Karl Anton, Prince of Hohenzollern (1868-1919), a member of the *Großer Generalstab* (General Staff), about the first versions of the Schlieffen Plan which intended to “mask” Liège and Namur with *Landwehr* brigades. The king thought it quite injurious for his army. Another idea, still present in 1914, was that the siege of the forts would constitute a serious waste of time. Naturally, the Belgian High Command was unaware of

the existence of 305mm and 420mm in Austrian and German artillery parks. Against these high range guns, the concrete vault of the forts was too thin and their artillery counter-firing was completely inefficient. The most powerful guns in the Belgian forts were 150mm and 210mm. Furthermore, many turrets in Antwerp or on the Meuse were still equipped with 120mm. So contrary to the Belgian scenarios elaborated since 1891, Liège could be captured in ten days. As a result, the main German armies were able to cross the Meuse on 14 August 1914, without any major impact on their timetables (one or two days only). In any case, the resistance of "poor little Belgium" was extremely powerful...symbolically. More than all complex diplomatic arguments about the "scrap of paper," the Belgian "noble gesture" convinced French and British public opinions of the "dishonourable German guilt" and responsibility in the outbreak of war.

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Notes

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17. † De Ryckel, Mémoires 1920, pp. 126-39.
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24. † De Selliers de Moranville, Contribution 1933, pp. 61-68; De Vos, Belgien 2007, p. 308.
25. † Galet, Emile: S.M. le Roi Albert, Commandant en chef devant l'invasion allemande [HRH King Albert, Commander in Chief before the German Invasion], Paris 1931, p. 378.
26. † Galet, S.M. le Roi 1931, Annex III, pp. 374-89.
27. † Galet, S.M. le Roi 1931, p. 39.
28. † Galet, S.M. le Roi 1931, p. 21.
29. † Selliers's and Galet's testimonies differ about the king's opinion. See: De Selliers de Moranville, Contribution 1933, pp. 142-45; Galet, S.M. le Roi 1931, pp. 53-56.
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