War Aims and War Aims Discussions (Belgium)

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Summary

Belgium's war aims were a direct consequence of the way in which the country was created. The treaties finalized in 1839 left Belgium with part of Luxembourg and Limburg, and also left the Scheldt access to Antwerp under Dutch control. During World War I, Belgian leaders decided to demand changes to these borders and also to obtain substantial reparations for four years of brutal occupation. However, none of these aims were realized at Versailles.

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Introduction

Belgium was the sole neutral country to change its position to one of belligerence at the outbreak of the war. As such, its war aims cannot be separated from its mandated commitment to neutrality, a respectable position until World War I.[1] However, while neutrality gave Belgium the symbolic moral high ground, it also rendered the establishment of war aims difficult, as these had to be developed during the war without sufficient opportunity to overcome the country's deep historic divisions.

Belgium had a powerful symbolic role in the war aims of the Entente, despite not being a member. Belgium's fate gave the Entente a moral position important to both British and American public opinion. The unconditional restoration of Belgium became an Entente precondition to negotiations. However, Belgium's war aims would diverge from those of the

Entente. Belgium also negotiated separately with Germany, a move which was legal but hardly popular. Belgium had powerful interests that contradicted the desires of other Entente powers, which affected both the Netherlands and Luxembourg. Conflicts would develop among these three nations over reparations.

Furthermore, the Belgians could not develop true war aims before 1914. Even after 1914, prewar desires for a revision of the border or a Dutch alliance could not be translated into action. Belgium remained nominally neutral. This made establishing treaties for the postwar era difficult.

An Ambiguous Creation

Belgium's creation left boundaries that were seen as unsatisfactory. The Peace of Westphalia left the Dutch with large parts of Brabant and Limburg, as well as both banks of the Scheldt river, which linked Antwerp to the sea. In 1784, Joseph II, Holy Roman Emperor (1741-1790) attempted to have the river opened.[2] In 1795, the French overran the Low Countries. With the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), the great powers opted to create a united Netherlands as a barrier to future French expansionism.[3] When the Belgians revolted in 1830, the great powers signed a highly favorable treaty, which was rejected by the Dutch, who instead invaded Belgium. A new treaty (1839) forced the Belgians to cede eastern Luxembourg, Limburg and the south bank of the Scheldt to the Dutch. To the Belgians, their geography looked distinctly less secure.[4] In return, Belgium guaranteed neutrality. To the Belgians, territory and neutrality were two sides of the same coin. This is critical to understanding their war aims.

War Aims Prior to 1914

Except for unfriendly relations with Holland, Belgium's position seemed secure as the 19th century wore on. Occasional moves to change the borders by force went nowhere. Still, as Germany grew, a sense of vulnerability developed.[5]

The threat stimulated a desire for military ties with the Netherlands. This idea was not entirely new, as the Belgians had long feared (and German Chief of Staff Alfred von Schlieffen (1833-1913) had planned) a crossing of Dutch Limburg. Few Dutch were interested in establishing military ties with Belgium. In 1905, journalist Eugène Baie (1874-1963) launched a campaign for economic and military ties, but the response was muted. Proposals for military talks were rejected and even the prewar crises did not lead to more favorable Dutch reactions.[6] This would be remembered after 1914.

The Scheldt issue was still unresolved. The question of whether or not Belgium's guarantors could use the river without Dutch permission remained. In 1910 there was an international outcry regarding the Dutch decision to fortify the river at Vlissingen.[7] Unfettered access became a Belgian war aim, which was almost achieved at Versailles.

Security became an increasingly elusive goal. Military talks with foreign powers were only marginally useful. Belgium could not make firm commitments because of its own neutrality, and talks had to be strictly secret for fear that they might lead to accusations that the Belgians were violating their neutrality. Talks were held with the British in 1906 and 1912, but these went nowhere and the Germans found out anyway. There was little political will to strengthen the Belgian army. Improvements were under way, but on the eve of war, Belgium was even weaker than the Netherlands – although recent Belgian research disputes this.[8]

Invasion

Belgium was unprepared for war in 1914. Even its military deployment was dictated by its almost myopic commitment to neutrality.[9] The problem was that Belgium could not regain its independence without foreign military aid. This was not a simple matter. The Dutch suggested joint action if both countries were invaded – but once it became clear that the Netherlands was safe, the Dutch disappeared. This would affect Belgium's war aims. Additionally, neither Britain nor France planned a major effort in Belgium beyond the Ardennes, so the Belgian and Entente armies did not fight together until the Belgian army withdrew to the Yser. At Liege, on the Belgian plain, and at Antwerp, the Belgians were on their own except for a single British division – Winston Churchill (1874-1965) being the sole British leader who had wanted to make a major effort at Antwerp. Had this happened, Belgium would have gained the Scheldt and perhaps much more at Versailles. However, all countries agreed with the continuation of the existing Scheldt regime in wartime which meant that the Belgians could only hope for postwar modification.[10]

Survival

The immediate war aim was survival and reemergence as a sovereign and united state. This meant resisting dissident Flemish movements and even negotiating with the Germans, albeit at a low level. Albert I, King of the Belgians (1875-1934) sometimes permitted this because he could not be certain that the Entente would win. If Germany won, the country faced annexation or division. However, while these negotiations were legal – Belgium had never joined the Declaration of London (1914), which forbade a separate peace – the Allies were not happy. Nor was Belgium willing to throw its army into bloody offensives, as replacing losses

was very difficult.[11]

The negotiations with Germany reflected deep Belgian pessimism – especially from the king. Albert's main worry was that the war would end in a stalemate, slowly resolved through a series of separate peaces. He therefore allowed his confidant Émile Waxweiler (1867-1916) to enter into conversations with the king's brother-in-law, Hans Veit zu Toerring-Jettenbach (1862-1927), beginning in November 1915. Waxweiler proposed that Belgium annex the Dutch territory of Flanders. These talks ended in February 1916, but the French remained suspicious. In October 1916, the Belgian banker Franz Philippson (1851-1929) attempted to bring approaches from German contacts to the Belgian government, but the cabinet refused. Albert later contacted a German prelate in Rome to act as intermediary. In 1917, Prime Minister Charles de Broqueville (1860-1940) nearly held secret talks with the political director of the occupation, Oscar Freiherr von der Lancken-Wakenitz (1867-1939), but these fell through.[12]

Belgian pessimism was understandable. Postwar Allied support was uncertain. The declaration of Sainte-Adresse (1916) promised that there would be no peace until Belgium was re-established and "largely indemnified", but there was no mention of future war aims. The French had struck a reference to Belgium's "just aims". France and Belgium had overlapping interests in Luxembourg. Claims that alienated the Netherlands could not be stated publicly, because the Dutch were housing a hundred thousand refugees and representing Belgian interests in many places. The Entente could not risk driving the Netherlands into German arms. Only Russia fully supported Belgium's demands. Foreign Minister Eugène Beyens (1855-1934) counseled caution.[13]

Beyens' opposition to annexationism received the king's sympathy but led to criticisms that he was too passive and, finally, his dismissal in July 1917. Prime Minister de Broqueville supported annexationism – although more overtly in regards to Luxembourg than the Netherlands – and held the foreign ministry until his own dismissal the following January. The rest of the cabinet was divided, however, except regarding Luxembourg.[14]

Hymans, Annexationism, and Versailles

Despite the divisions, the new foreign minister enthusiastically pursued annexation. Paul Hymans (1865-1941) was a lawyer and Liberal Party politician with great ambition and no experience in foreign affairs before he assumed the legation in London in 1915. Whether he promoted annexation as a matter of policy or for domestic political reasons has never been settled; for that matter, the extent to which he represented a true unified annexation lobby is

problematic, which may explain why he remained cautious about announcing it as official policy.[15] His aims did combine Belgium's security and economic interests. Control of the Scheldt would facilitate Allied aid and protect Antwerp's commerce, which was important to both halves of Belgium; Antwerp could become the foundation of significantly expanded trade to the Rhine. Gaining Dutch Limburg would allow defense of the entire Meuse river, and provide a canal to the Rhine. Annexing Luxembourg would benefit both national defense and the economy.[16]

In 1839, Belgium had renounced these claims but Hymans argued that the treaties were imposed and that the boundaries were the price of a now destroyed neutrality. The entire treaty package had to be renegotiated, with the guarantors and the Dutch at the table. The "package" definition was necessary because the territorial renunciation was in a separate Belgo-Dutch treaty; if it were not seen as part of a package, Belgium would have to demand the lands in separate negotiations with the Dutch – with a predictable outcome.[17]

Hymans was therefore seeking to expand at the expense of a neutral Netherlands, which was not impossible given the Netherlands' unpopularity, but would contradict the Entente's ideological claims. There are no surviving documents in which Hymans clarifies how he would square this with Woodrow Wilson's (1856-1924) Fourteen Points. Claiming Luxembourg risked alienating France. Finally, pushing annexation could undermine his other major objective, reparations, which David Lloyd George (1863-1945) opposed. Domestically, Hymans faced more opposition than he had anticipated.[18]

The Belgian annexation movement ran the gamut of functionaries (most notably Pierre Nothomb (1887-1966) and Pierre Orts (1872-1958)), journalists (such as Ferdinand Neuray), and politically-minded businessmen (like Gaston Barbanson (1876-1946)), and was encouraged more in private than in public by de Broqueville and other cabinet ministers. Their task was difficult; one author has labeled the movement's leaders as "dreamers." Tactically, they were divided over whether to act publicly or to remain behind the scenes. Originally seeking part of the Netherlands and all of Luxembourg, they had to be content with an official *rapprochement* with the latter in 1921. Even the transfer of Luxembourgish soldiers to the Belgian colors was blocked by the French – although here, the annexationists blamed weak Belgian diplomacy (as they often did). A personal union via the king seemed feasible, but the government feared that to get French support would require accession to a military alliance, which the Belgians wanted to avoid. Ultimately, the opposition of the industrialists and the church in Luxembourg may have doomed the project – assuming that the French would have allowed it all.[19]

That brings up the controversial question of whether the Belgian war aims were achievable. The obstacles were enormous, but Hymans alienated all three dominant powers and the Dutch effectively fought the Belgians. In addition, the Belgian war aims were not stated explicitly, nor were they pursued in a united fashion. The three Belgian delegates – Jules van den Heuvel (1854-1926), Emile Vandervelde (1866-1938), and Hymans – pursued different issues, and in the case of the latter two, sometimes worked at cross-purposes. Hymans appears to have prevailed in March 1919, when the Commission on Belgian Affairs agreed with almost all of his points, but a few weeks later the great powers effectively reversed this. Belgium would be forced to negotiate directly with the Netherlands, and although it was granted some priority in reparations, this victory proved symbolic. Hymans had to threaten departure to gain even that, but it was no small achievement given the increasing hostility shown by Lloyd George and Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929). Hymans nearly obtained free access to the Scheldt, but due to a tactical error, even this opportunity was missed.[20]

Belgium also sought territories on its eastern edge and in the colonial sphere. In the local arena, the Belgians were more successful, albeit at some cost. Moresnet and Malmédy were uncontroversial, the former canton having been neutral, and the latter clearly Wallonian in character. Eupen was another matter. Germany contested its transfer for an entire decade. In addition, the Belgians were forced to assume the two cantons' share of the German state debt – about 641,000 gold marks. Ironically, the Belgian government had not been much interested in Eupen, but its generals and some industrialists wanted it. Ultimately, Belgium gained less territory than neutral Denmark, and less territory than any continental victor except Portugal. In Africa, the Belgian position was slightly stronger in that the Belgian forces occupied a third of German East Africa and were not predisposed to leave without a favorable settlement, to which, however, the British and Americans were opposed. Eventually Belgium settled for Rwanda-Burundi, about 5 percent of the German territory. An earlier plan to make Belgium guarantor of the holy places in Palestine had come to naught in 1917.[21]

Outcomes

None of Belgium's major war aims – security, territory, and money – were fully met at Versailles. Belgium secured neither border adjustments nor solid guarantees. American Secretary of State Robert Lansing (1864-1928) was one of the few who recommended military alliances. Belgium did negotiate an alliance with France in 1920, but abandoned it in 1936 to return to neutrality. The individual territorial claims all failed. Luxembourg, at least, remained outside the French sphere, and, in 1921, the two countries did negotiate an economic union – although, ironically, despite the objections of Belgian industrialists. The legal status of the Scheldt was unchanged. The Limburg border stayed put, although the

accidental retention of Article 361 of the Versailles Treaty demonstrates that the Belgians came very close to achieving their desires on this issue. Direct negotiations with the Dutch about the Scheldt collapsed. A treaty was negotiated in 1925, but the Dutch upper house rejected it, leaving the river's situation unchanged to the present day.[22]

Belgium had sought both substantial reparations and a priority status, i.e. that some of its payments would be made before the Entente powers were compensated. Belgium's postwar needs were enormous and it faced crushing debts to the British and Americans. Liquidity and speed of payment was far more important than a hypothetical issue, but the project nearly collapsed, because of German refusal to pay and the difficulty of assessing the enormous number of damage claims, many of which were exaggerated. The 16 June 1919 agreement did give Belgium substantial results, but this was whittled down as the years passed, and the Belgians were faced with constant British attempts to remove the priority altogether. The attempts finally ended because of Churchill's intervention. Material deliveries from Germany proved disappointing. Amidst disarray on how to punish the Germans, the Belgians finally opted to support the French occupation of the Ruhr. Ultimately, Belgium received 2.95 billion gold marks, a respectable achievement considering that France and Britain received 8.23 and 4.06 billion, respectively. Still, to quote Sally Marks (1931-2018), "Belgian priority… proved to be somewhat less of a victory than it had originally seemed."[23]

Unsurprisingly, the Belgians were deeply disappointed, with nationalists describing the results as shameful. Modern scholars agree, labelling the results as "*faible*", "*een grote teleurstelling*", and "*het was verder niets geworden*". Fortunately for Hymans, his career did not suffer; Belgian public opinion blamed the Allies entirely.[24]

Conclusion

The Belgian war aims suffered from inherent defects. The border claims were based on diplomatic and military ways of thinking better suited to the 19th century than the 20th. Even so, they were not completely unrealistic, and gained support from top aides to Wilson and Clemenceau. With better preparation and presentation, more might have been achieved. To be fair, no nation emerged from the conference entirely satisfied, and Italy, for example, fared even worse than Belgium.

The consequences would be significant. With its security needs unmet, Belgium would be unprepared for the second German onslaught. In particular, the territorial expansion attempt alienated the Netherlands and ended whatever chance there was that the Low Countries might have cooperated with each other in the face of the growing Nazi threat.

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