A Small Nation in the Turmoil of the Second World War

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Published by Leuven University Press

Verbreyt, Monique and Herman Van der Wee.
A Small Nation in the Turmoil of the Second World War: Money, Finance and Occupation (Belgium, its Enemies, its friends, 1939-1945).

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Preace

War, occupation and liberation are phenomena that have a very specific character. In the first place, minor incidents are experienced much more intensely and self-consciously than similar incidents in peacetime. Indeed, a population caught up in them has the sense of being involved in ‘the making of history’, following the unfolding drama of war with acute interest, bearing the attendant misery with courage, sometimes being wracked by fear, and not infrequently – through resistance or collaboration – playing an active part in the exceptional circumstances.

In the second place, the unfolding of events in war conceals a certain paradox. On the one hand, military action and occupation disrupt normal communication and consequently reduce daily life to the micro-level of village or town, causing social life to turn in on itself and concentrate on the bare essentials. On the other, they generate complexity at macro-level. The normal interaction of necessity, coincidence and freedom in the historical process is, in fact, seriously compromised: during a war, the predictable, structured element in the course of history appears weaker; in contrast, coincidence plays a greater part and there is increased scope for the creative, unpredictable contribution of strong personalities. All this leads to a new and more complex combination of driving forces on the macro-stage of history.

The history of Belgian central banking during the period from 1939 to 1945 reflects this paradox, making the writing of this narrative an enthralling task and at the same time posing a great challenge for the authors. To this was added the serious problem of the source material. The archives that have been preserved in Belgium and abroad are unusually rich and the general writings on the Second World War – a necessary source if the history of Belgian central banking was to be placed in its correct, historical context – are myriad. As a result, selection was the order of the day, but the question remained of whether the information processed was representative. In fact, ensuring representativeness was the constant and guiding principle for the authors in their
choice of what to include. Lastly, there was the fact that, during the war, the Banque Nationale de Belgique and the Banque d’Emission were under great pressure and had to cope with tense relationships with all kinds of bodies in both occupied and unoccupied territories. In order to ascertain the true circumstances of all these tensions, it was often necessary to dig deep, the aim always being to unravel as fully as possible the complexity of the situations examined and to take account of all the variables that came into play. This proved to be no simple task and goes to explain the book’s substantial size. In the English edition, there has been a degree of pruning: detailed explanations about internal developments in Belgium have been shortened and a large number of notes – chiefly in respect of quotations that served only to underpin the text – have been excised.

As far as we know, few academic works see the light of day just in consequence of the merits of their authors. In writing this particular book, we, too, have been able to count on the cooperation of a wide circle of people and on the confidence that they have placed in our work. It will surprise no-one that our thanks go first to Guy Quaden, Governor of the Banque Nationale de Belgique, and in particular to Luc Coene, Deputy-governor: not only were they, together with Alfons Verplaetse, former governor of the Bank, the originators of the project, but they also secured us the unvaluable support of Luc Ghékiere, Secretary-general, aided by Ivo Maes and Jean-Percy Cassiers. Coordinating the overall project – which, besides our book, included a further three volumes that take the story up to 1971 – was Walter Pluym, ever assiduous and willing. Olivier Boehme, and in particular Joseph Makart, made our archive research within and outside the Banque Nationale a great deal more effective.

We were also able to rely on excellent help in our research into foreign archives: guiding us through the Dutch archives were Dr. Sierk Platinga, Dr. Christiaan Rupert, Geert Lamfers, Corry van Renselaer and Hélène De Muy-Fleurke; through the American archives, the late Dr. Milton Gustafson; and through the archives of the Bank of England, Dr. Anne Fremault, Archivist Sarah Miljard and Deputy-Archivist Jenny Ulph. The fact that we did not lose the thread in the endless
documentation of the French archives we owe to Michel Margairaz, Olivier Feiertag, Fabrice Reuzé, and Jean Quinet, and to mesdames Bordogna, Pagès, Cueille and Bouttier. For our research into the German archives, we were able to turn to Professor Manfred Pohl and Dr. Martin Müller. In our home country, we had the unconditional support of Madeleine Jacquemin, Françoise d’Arras d’Haudrecy, Françoise Peemans and Caroline Six, as well as their colleagues Dr. Dirk Luyten, René Brion, Jean-Louis Moreau and Mark Van Pottelbergh. A special word of thanks goes to Tony Vandeputte, who spoke to us about his father, Robert Vandeputte, a former governor of the Banque Nationale.

We are deeply indebted to the Research Fund of Leuven University, in particular to its Vicerector Research Policy Professor Dr. Paul De Boeck and its Senior staff member Research Policy and secretary of the Research Council Ms. Josée Houben, and to the University Foundation at Brussels, in particular Ms. Hilde Garmyn, for their generous help for the English edition. Our warmest thanks also to Mrs. An Delva for sharing with us her rich experience in the world of book illustrations, and to Leuven University Press, its Chairman and Board of Directors, and in particular Ms. Marike Schipper, Director, Ms. Beatrice Van Eeghem and Ms. Nienke van Schaverbeke, who assisted us most friendly and efficiently with the publication of the book. Finally, we owe a great debt to Professor Peter Mathias, who was so kind to go over the English manuscript. We all know that he is un homme de lettres as well as un homme de science: his critical reading and relevant annotations of the translation, indeed, enhanced style and transparency of the text substantially. We are most grateful to him for this invaluable help.

Researching sources over a period of more than five years can be a lonely task, even when two people are doing the work together. For this reason, the authors are particularly grateful for the months of hospitality they received at various institutions, where staff and colleagues demonstrated an interest in their work and encouraged them in their research. Delightful months were spent at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (NIAS) at Wassenaar, at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (Institute for Advanced Study), and at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung. In this respect, the authors
owe a very substantial debt of gratitude to Professor Emeritus Henk L. Wesseling and Dr. Wouter Hugenholtz, respectively Honorary Rector and Director of the NIAS, to Professor Dieter Grimm and Dr. Joachim Nettelbeck, respectively Rector and Director of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, and to Professor Jürgen Kocka and Dr. Dagmar Simon, respectively President and Director of the Wissenschaftszentrum. Our debt of gratitude also extends to the staff of those institutions for the outstanding technical and administrative help that they provided.

The authors also wish to thank a number of institutions that kindly made available their rich collections of archives and documentation on the war period: firstly, the Banque Nationale de Belgique in Brussels; then the Algemeen Rijksarchief in Brussels, the archives of the Royal Palace, the Studie- en Documentatiecentrum ‘Oorlog en Hedendaagse Maatschappij’ (cegesoma), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Generale Maatschappij van België, the Krijgsauditoraat, the Université Catholique de Louvain (Louvain-la-Neuve) and the Kredietbank (now KBC Group). They also greatly valued the access they were allowed to the private archives of the Ansiaux, Baudewyns and Berger families.

Abroad, they were extremely hospitably and efficiently received at the Algemeen Rijksarchief, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance in The Hague, the Nederlandsche Bank in Amsterdam, the National Archives in Washington, D.C., the Herbert Hoover Institute on the campus of Stanford University at Palo Alto (California), the Bank of England in London, the Banque de France in Paris and the Deutsche Bank in Frankfurt-am-Main.

Heartfelt thanks go to Mr. and Mrs. William and Livine Van de Velde and Mr. and Mrs. Theo and Nicole Erauw, who gave us unrestricted use of their holiday home, a place where we could work undisturbed, as if on an uninhabited island, and where we could live in the peace of nature. Finally, and with sadness, the authors thank the late Ms. Simone Verbreyt for the invaluable help she gave in organizing the documentation for the book: she expected so much of the book, but, alas, she was not destined to see it in print.

Herman Van der Wee and Monique Verbreyt
‘De Hettinghe’, 4 May 2009