The Campaign of the Belgian Army in 1940

Edmond De Fabribeckers

Translated by Major General Michael G Krause (retired)

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Preface

History recounts few other campaigns where an army was forced to surrender so quickly.

Rendered almost helpless by aerial attacks, forced into successive retreats necessitated both by particular circumstances and by the overall situation, the Belgian Army arrived in Flanders exhausted and disorganised, where it took its place on the left of the Allied Armies on the River Lys, in defence of the beachhead that eventually enabled the Allied evacuation from Dunkerque.

For history to be useful it is not only necessary to relate the courage, the endurance and the sufferings of the Belgian troops, but especially to highlight mistakes so that others may learn the right lessons.

Despite Adolf Hitler's threats and criminal aggression, from 1933 the nations of Old Europe remained as passive and as care-free as the Roman Empire in its period of decadence and decline.

The nations chose to deny reality to reassure themselves,. Dr. Goebbels said that a lie repeated fifty times becomes a reality; fifty times is not necessary when the lie suits the interests of the recipient.

A general lack of energy eroded the sense of duty and weakened the national spirit, which became focused on self-interest. This same malaise also contaminated the armies, stoking a fear of responsibilities in the chiefs and lax discipline in subordinates.

From the first hour of the invasion, every Belgian was acutely aware of the lack of anti-aircraft defence. It was a crime to send troops to the battlefield without the necessary equipment. This crime was not just attributable to the Military Command, obliged to make the best use of the tools at its disposal, but to the Nation, which consciously or unconsciously often refused or delayed the necessary military funding in time of peace. From 1939, the Belgian Ministry tried in vain to obtain the necessary anti-aircraft armament, for one does not wait until a house is already in flames to order a fire extinguisher.

Confronted with the risk of war, the attitude of the Allies from 1914-1918 was marked by a weakness almost bordering on cowardice, so that the old military alliances and agreements were allowed to decay. Given the power of the potential aggressor, a strong military alliance was prudent; this alliance, no more than economic agreements, would not have implied the renunciation of Belgian independence, nor the formation of a complex of nations in which the greater ones inevitably ended up shackling the small ones.

But it is especially on the moral plane that the Allies were ill prepared to face a war and if England and France made more mistakes than the Belgians, their faults do not excuse Belgium, any more than the faults obscure the acts of bravery and endurance of many of the Belgian troops.

To write this book, the author was helped by many friends: Mr. James Thiriar, the late illustrator whose engraving series was his last complete work; they have the value of documents because they resulted from a study of the operations, on-site reconnaissance and photographs of the time;

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Colonel Brusten, who facilitated and guided research in the archives of the Army Historical Section, of which he is the head, and who, without going into details, was kind enough to check, rectify or clarify certain facts or points of view;

Major Sels who worked with the author in the classification and writing of the texts;

Lieutenant-Colonel Horlin who provided the author with information on the operations and arrangements of the German Army from the original documents;

Adjutant Bargibant who drew the maps from the documents of the Armed History Section.

Preface written by the original author Edmond de Fabribeckers

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Part One

The Lead Up To May 10, 1940

Chapter One

The International situation

The Allies dismembered Austria-Hungary after the 1914-1918 war with little trouble but decided to maintain the central integrity of Germany despite some territorial reallocations. By granting Poland a corridor connecting it to the port of Danzig on the Baltic, they separated old Prussia from the rest of Germany, which sooner or later was bound to provoke conflict.

As always after the great wars, well-meaning dreamers and pacifists sought ways to prevent a reaccurrence.

After the reign of Louis XIV, the Abbot of Saint-Pierre had proposed an arbitration council of the eighteen reigning sovereigns; after the exile of Napoleon, the Emperor Alexander I of Russia had created the Holy Alliance; after 1918 President Wilson of the United States gave us all the Leauge of Nations, all of them very admirable organisations designed to maintain peace and created when people were still disgusted with the preceding war.

The return of Alsace-Lorraine satisfied France, and its great personnel and materiel losses inclined it to pacifism. The French created strong fortifications on the Rhine frontier, naming them Maginot after the then Minister of War, and then France neglected its Army believing itself safe from danger.

In Germany, public opinion was divided between Communism, born of misery, and the spirit of revenge kept alive by memories of the defeat.

Taking advantage of this discontent, Adolf Hitler created the National Socialist Party (Nazi) by promising everyone well-paid work in a new and powerful Germany. His momentum became so great that, on 30 January 1933, Field Marshal von Hindenburg, President of the German Republic, was persuaded to appoint him as Chancellor.

After the death of the old Marshal, which occurred on 2 August 1933, Hitler added to his role of Chancellor those of President of the Republic, and disolved Parliament to become Germany's absolute dictator.

From then on he accelerated events to realize his desires by all possible means.

On 25 July 1934, the Austrian Chancellor Englebert Dollfuss was assassinated by Austrian Nazis.

On 1 October 1934, the German Army ordered an expansion from 100,000 to 300,000 men in defiance of the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles.

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On 16 March 1935, compulsory military service was restored in Germany, bringing the total strength of the Army to 500,000 men.

On 7 March 1936, the left bank of the Rhine was reoccupied by the German military.

On 6 November 1937, the Anti-Comintern (Anti-Communist) Pact bound Italy and Germany together.

On 11 March 1938, Austria was occupied and annexed.

The traditional Allies saw the growing danger but France and England merely protested at every violation of the Treaty of Versailles, not being militarily ready nor morally prepared to intervene effectively.

In September 1938, France mobilised when Czechoslovakia was threatened in turn but the unexpected agreement between Poland and Germany to cede the territory of Teschen to Poland somewhat reversed the balance of forces. Summoned to Munich, England and France forced their Czechoslavakian ally on 30 September 1938 to yield to Germany its border fortifications and a significant part of its economic wealth.

From that moment, even the staunchest pacifist understood that the war clouds were gathering, and the arms race had begun, but it was all too late.

On 15 March 1939, German troops seized the rest of Czechoslovakia without running the slightest danger of war.

Finally, on 24 August 1939, Germany signed a pact of non-aggression with Russia and on 1 September 1939 German troops entered Poland.

On 3 September 1939, Great Britain and France declared war; when they were at their strongest, they had not dared to intervene, but they were forced to do so when they were no longer, and engaged in what could only be considered a quite dangerous venture, in which the Belgians would unfortunately have to participate.

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Chapter II

The Troops

The Regular Cadre

Prior to 1940, active officer training in Belgium was provided by two institutions:

- The Royal Military College where candidates entered by competition;

- Exam A or examination by the cadre which allowed gifted NCOs to attain the rank of officer.

The training at both the Military School and by the cadre was considered of a very high standard.

The Special Weapons section of the Royal Military Academy awarded an engineering degree to artillery and engineer branch officers.

Unfortunately, especially in the engineer branch, many officers took the opportunity to then leave the Army and enter industry where they were better paid.

The Belgian government never followed a consistent policy from the military's point of view: Examination A for artillery and engineers was practically abolished in 1928, while the Royal Military College trained too few officers.

When the international situation became threatening in 1937, the Belgians lacked 877 active officers, including 516 for the infantry.

Examination A was immedietly re-established the same year for the specialist branches and offers were made to reserve officers. Some joined because of interest in the trade, others for lack of opportunity in the civil sector, which resulted in recruitment of unequal quality.

The training of a good cadre of officers takes years and as the value of an army depends on its leaders, this issue should never be lost sight of.

It was the same for the mid-ranking staff officers at the War College where the tendency was always to restrict the number of students far too much. Extending this strong education could only raise the level of knowledge of the officer cadre while offering the certainty of having general staff officers in wartime. A criticism was often made of them however: they had spent too long in their offices and too little time with the troops, which made them lose touch with reality.

After 1918, NCOs were trained in schools. Three six-month short courses were organised: two scientific courses for students with insufficient general education and a professional course to learn a specific skill.

The results were very good. Unfortunately, these schools were abolished for the sake of the budget and the responsibility for instruction of the future graduates passed to the regiments, which did not have the instructors nor the training and education material necessary.

On the other hand, the NCO instructor courses were retained, which always produced excellent, high-performing NCOs.

But the recruitment of non-commissioned officers was still defficient in numbers. If the pay of 30 centimes made poor militiamen very unhappy, that of 1 fr 30 for the volunteers and 1 fr 60 for the

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infantry and cavalry junior NCOs attracted hardly any takers.

When these volunteers were not supported by their families, they were often looking for better-off friends so they could clean their harnesses and stand guard in their place for a small fee so they could at least buy jam and go to the movies on a Sunday.

After having passed the exams and undergoing two years of this near-poverty, they could be non-commissioned officers unless a restrictive policy postponed their appointment to an indeterminate date.

So the Belgian Army also lacked NCOs. The was exacerbated because, in time of war, each peace-time unit had to form three to four additional units, meaning most had only one or two to enter the field.

B. The soldiers

Most recruits came into the Army with a strong anti-war bias due to the anti-militarist undertones and opinions in many schools and colleges, as well as in various ancillirary organisations, even those claiming to inculcate a sense of civil duty in Belgian youths.

The Ministry of Education and the teaching staff bore a great deal of responsibility in this regard.

In 1914, when there had been a threat of war, the population responded by creating military readinness companies in all cities and many rural communities.

The same danger leading up to 1940 only provoked demonstrations promoted by the lobby group the 'broken rifle'.

The recruits were therefore ill-prepared for military service, and especially for combat, because of the lack of a concerted and consistent effort by Belgian authorities.

At that time, theorists with ill-informed intentions preached "individual consensual voluntary discipline," the greatest military heresy of all time because only group discipline can keep all soldiers in their units and all units on the battlefield.

This discipline is not suddenly acquired during a war, it must be inculcated during peace time. At the end of the battle of the Lys only the disciplined soldiers were still present, abandoned by the others whose discipline had failed under fire.

Compulsory Military Service can only teach so much in preparation for war; because as the Briton, Colonel Bramble, once said to his French interpreter, André Maurois: "Military life is a very hard life, sometimes mixed with real dangers."

It is therefore normal to teach recruits how to endure privations and fatigues similar to those of war, while forcing them to control fear with realistically dangerous exercises.

In the artillery, instruction on horseback made it possible to reach this twin aim: galloping acrobatics, jumping of obstacles, and different galloping positions, transformed boys accustomed to the work of

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a bereau, shop, workshop, or farm into really effective soldiers.

These arduous exercises hardened them, made them confront a certain amount of real and perceived danger, and created a sense of comradeship, a solidarity between these young people exposed to the same falls and to the same fear, and subjected to a rather austere military service.

This solidarity, or cohesion, was of great importance in war because while in the infantry many men reacted to the danger as individuals, in the artillery they always acted as they were drilled and always tried to work together as a team.

It was harder to get that result from the infantry. Yet a good example was given by an elite regiment, the Chasseurs Ardennais. In peacetime an elite regiment is a corps of soldiers who, persuaded to be superior warriors, willingly accept more intensive training.

The green beret and the boar's head was worn with pride by that unit, but some senior officers, dissaproving of such affectations, continued to refer to the unit in orders as the 10th Line Regiment, the regiment from which the Chasseurs Ardennaias was formed.

When the colonel of the 1st Carabiniers received permission to add to the name of his Regiment the honorary title 'Prince Baudouin', name of the brother of King Albert, some chiefs muttered in disaproval, forgetting that the habit of numbering regiments like the houses on a street was hardly helping the creation of a good esprit de corps.

The infantry officers generally took care of their men, and they prepared their moral education lectures as carefully as their tactical exercises, while, in the artillery, these lectures were often skipped and the time spent cleaning harnesses instead.

However, the results obtained were still sub-optimal because any strong physical exertion, or any exercise a little too violent, was carefully avoided for fear of an accident: a toe-nail cracked by an infantrymen shook the whole hierarchy right to the head for fear of a press article or a statement in Parliament.

A case of a broken leg in the artillery, on the other hand, led to only a brief report along with an accompanying medical certificate because the Belgian people, who knew horses well because of cinema, understood very well that a good cowboy could be injured.

The great defect of the Belgian infantry was its inability to conduct endurance marches, a problem that had previously been remarked on in in 1914.

Not appreciating that a significant part of the campaign would be devoted to a speed contest between friendly infantry and enemy motorisied troops, Belgian regulations provided that the normal daily march distance would be 20 km per day, while German infantry were being trained to expect several 50-kilometer stages, followed by two days of combat manoeuvres.

The endurance marching ability of troops depended on three factors: training, footwear and equipment weight.

The equipment load of 30 kg was too heavy and the uniform coat not well suited for marching.

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A new type of boot was adopted in 1937 but, given the large stocks of existing boots, few soldiers had the opportunity to use and admire this new little wonder.

The service marches at the end of the enlistment period consisted of five consecutive stages of 15, 18, 20, 25, and 28 km; on the fifth day a third of the men were unable to fall-in and continue the march.

The military authorities did not dare to enforce this training because the Belgian population considered military service as somehow just an additional year of primary school dedicated to target shooting.

As a result, because they were as ignorant as their constituents, parliamentarians promised a reduction in military service as a standard part of their pitch in every new election campaign.

The term was eventually reduced to twelve months for drivers and machine-gunners, and to eight months for gunners and riflemen.

In summary, the more realistically trained and more hardened gunners held out better in 1940, while the infantry, treated too maternally, fell by the wayside and many surrendered before the general capitulation.

Logically, the training of the infantryman should have been harder than that of the gunners who moved on horseback, but the very opposite occurred.

This was one of the causes of the collapse of some infantry units: they were subjected to fatigue in wartime for which they had not been accustomed during peace.

C. The Reserve Cadre

After 1918, the Ministry established schools for candidate reserve officers in Brasschaat and Bourg Leopold. This measure proved highly effective because instructors had the necessary equipment and room for field manoeuvers. In the artillery, for example, the candidates participated in live firing from the third week.

After six to eight months at school, they left for their regiments where they finished their service as non-commissioned officers.

From 1926, however, these schools were abolished, and the training of the future reserve officers was entrusted to the training schools in the regiments, which did not have the necessary instructors nor training equipment.

Some time later, regional recruitment was introduced, a veritable catastrophe for the selection of future reserve officers. The regiments from the larger cities received academics, while those of the provinces, especially the infantry, had only a very limited choice among soldiers having more or less just finished basic schooling. Thus, in some regiments the non-commissioned reserve officers were much better educated than the reserve officers of other regiments.

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Most of the regimental school units were well run, but in some there was an unfortunate tendency to consider the candidates as students rather than as military personnel. They sometimes abused the training opportunity, and so in the 1st Artillery for example, the military authorities were obliged to dissolve the school battery and send its pupils to finish their service as soldiers in other regiments.

After their initial period of service, reserve officers were required to complete a six-day recall every four years. Some even changed this to three days of recall every two years. These ridiculously short retraining periods did not produce any practical results.

Arriving in units that were already on manoeuvers, they were given no command responsibilities and they attended exercises, often as spectators, that no one had time to explain to them.

One day at Elsenborn, a group of artillery was to manoeuver in the presence of a general who had come especially to evaluate the commanding major. Fearing for his advancement with a unit made up officers of whom half were reservists who had only been there for a day or two, the major asked other regular artillery groups to provide him with active officers to perform the duties that were supposed to be performed by the reservistss.

At the final review, the general expressed, in flowery terms, his complete confidence in the 'reserve' officers. It must be admitted that it was unwise to judge any officer on the manoeuver of his unit led in part by reservists that may or may not have been present that day.

Unwilling to be regarded as unwelcome tourists, many reserve officers lost interest in the Army and tried to escape these useless recalls.

Confronted by reality from the first days of mobilisation, the judgment of some leaders passed abruptly from one extreme to the other. Following their inspections, they often used the formula consecrated by over-use: 'The general is astonished that ...' as if they were the first to be astonished.

The reserve non-commissioned officers were largely the students of the school units who, in the final examination rankings, had not attained the necessary marks for the rank of officer. Some of them were valuable men whom the Army would have benefited from appointing as officers in the less well-manned regiments.

They were ideally suited for special duties: gunnery NCOs, observers, etc., but sometimes became ineffective when they had to command men.

At the completion of service of each class, a certain number of the best soldiers were promoted to corporals or lance corporals. The measure was a good one, but it would have been better if these promotions had been made two months earlier, gto give the new NCOs an opportunity to practice command before leaving the service.

The reserve cadre's value at the end of the day was a direct reflection of the care taken to train it.

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Chapter III

Ways

Fortifications

In 1914, the duration of active service fixed by the law of 1909 (one son per family) and maintained by that passed in 1913 (general service) was 15 months for the Infantry, 21 months for the Artillery and 24 months to the Cavalry.

At the end of the occupation of the Rhineland in 1929, this period of service was reduced to one year. Even by incorporating each class into two quotas each of a few months, it was difficult to keep the border regiments sufficiently manned to resist a sudden attack.

To facilitate the defence of the Meuse, the Minister for Defence rearmed the old forts at Liege located near the river, those on the right bank plus the two on the left bank. Taking into account the experience of 1914, the old shelters were filled and replaced by others buried deeper, the cupolas were reinforced, and the intervals between the forts defended by concrete bunkers, etc.

Around 1932, a press campaign was launched to start the defence of Belgium closer to the border. It was understandable that the population demanded to stop an aggressor as soon as he entered the national territory, even at the border posts if that was possible, while the Army Command was loath to engage in battle in unfavourable conditions.

To strengthen the new position east of the Meuse, five major forts were to be established: that of Eben-Emaal, already under construction at the corner of the Albert Canal and the River Meuse, and those at Neufchâteau, Battice, Tancrémont and Sougné-Remouchamps whose intervals would be protected by additional concrete bunkers.

In front of this position, the whole region was to be full of bunkers to combat infiltrations and to delay the enemy advance.

The plans of the new forts were more or less inspired by the German fortifications at Metz: a large area, a strong garrison and relatively little artillery.

The Eben-Emaal fort was considered the most powerful in Europe: a 40-hectare central massif covering an area of 66 hectares. For long-range fire it had:

A dome turret of two 120mm guns (Coupole 120);

Two turrets of two 7.5 cm guns (Coupole Nord1 and Coupole Sud1);

Two casements of three 7.5 cm guns orientated towards Vise (Vise1 and Vise2);

Two cupolas of three 7.5 cm guns orientated towards Maastricht (Maastricht1 and Maastricht2);

Three false cupolas to attract enemy fire;

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Three observation domes on the fort;

Seven outer observation posts

For the defence of the fort:

Two casemates of machine guns on the superstructure (Mi-Nord and Mi-Sud);

Nine Blocs with 60mm guns;

Four anti-aircraft machine guns.

The war manning was to be 24 officers, 141 NCOs and 1,157 soldiers, or a total of 1,322 soldiers.

The funding was reduced more and more for the construction of forts at Neufchâteau, Battice, Tancrémont and Sougné-Remouchamps. For the fort at Tancrémont, instead of two cupolas each of two 120mm guns and three cupolas of two 7.5 cm guns initially planned, it received only two cupolas each of two 7.5cm guns.

As for the fort of Sougné-Remouchamps, it never even saw the light of day.

The concrete bunkers were of different models, but the most numerous possessed the following armament: in the embrasure of the casemate a gun of 4.7 cm and a machine-gun; in the walls were grenade launcher tubes. Some also included an armoured dome allowing observation and all-round firing with machineguns.

The entrance was at the rear. To penetrate the interior, it was necessary to cross an airlock formed by the metal outer door and an armored interior door opening into the bunker. For bunkers charged with the destruction of a bridge, an additional room was located below the bunker where the garrison withdrew during the detonation of the explosive charge. The firing device was placed in the airlock and not inside the bunker itself.

From 1936, the international situation changed rapidly. On one side was the intensive rearmament of Germany and the remilitarisation of the left bank of the Rhine. On the other side, there was an anti-militarist wave submerging France and a British Army inferior to that of 1914.

In 1937, the Belgian Government renounced the Franco-Belgian alliance and returned to the neutrality of pre-1914.

The defensive posture of Belgium was re-examined. Initially viewed as bold, the advanced defence was later considered as too dangerous. By defending a relatively large area beyond the Meuse, a significant part of the Army would have to fight in front of a major obstacle that would then have to be re-crossed in case of setbacks and, if not attacked and bypassed, it would risk being turned by a fast advance of the enemy, either through Dutch Limburg towards Tongres, or through the Ardennes towards Huy. The Belgian Army could therefore end up like the army of Field Marshal Mack in Ulm in 1805 or that of Marshal Bazaine in Metz in 1870.

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Moreover, by anchoring the defence instead on the Meuse, the Belgian Army would benefit from most of the fortifications already completed or under construction:

- Between the Scheldt and the Albert Canal: the northern part of the old belt of the Antwerp forts transformed into infantry bunkers, behind an anti-tank obstacle;
- The Albert Canal from Antwerp to the Meuse with concrete bunkers fitted for two machine guns every 600 meters;
- The fort of Eben-Emaal interdicting by fire the avenues of approach through Maastricht and Aachen;

- The Meuse covered by concrete bunkers from the fort of Eben-Emaal to the French border with the fortified bridgeheads of Liege and Namur, both established according to the following principles;
- In front of the bridgehead of Liège: the forts of Neufchâteau, Battice and Tancrémont with a bunker belt as a firm base for detachments tasked with demolitions and troops responsible for delaying the enemy advance;
- Bunkers in front of the main belt of these new forts, as well as those in Limburg and in the Ardennes to be used by the units tasked to delay the enemy and to carry out the demolitions in these regions.

Given the danger of a sudden attack, some of these bunkers needed to be permanently occupied by regular troops.

For the defence of the Ardennes, the 10th Line Regiment was reformed into a cyclist regiment wearing a green beret and renamed the Chasseurs Ardennais.

This regiment in time became a division, then on mobilisation in 1939, the VII Army Corps was formed, composed of the 1st Motorised Division of Chasseurs Ardennais, formed of reservists, a motorised artillery regiment (the 20th Artillery Regiment) and finally, in December 1939, a motorcycle battalion. These troops were mainly recruited from the provinces of Luxembourg and Namur.

From Limburg and the province of Liège, volunteers were called to form additional cyclist units, who wore a blue beret, and on 10 May 1940 they were formed into two regiments: the Frontier Cyclists and the Frontier Cyclist Battalion of Limburg.

B. The Composition of the Field Army

In the last years before the war, the Army began to modernize and adopted:
The Mauser rifle 1935;
The Browning machine gun;
A Maxim machine gun with optical sight;
The 7.6 cm FRC mortar;
The 4.7 cm antitank gun, significantly more powerful than the German 3.7 cm guns or the French 2.5 cm gun.

Unfortunately the submachine gun offered to the Ministry in 1935 was refused because of its short range and its wide dispersion. It is obviously a very big responsibility for a leader to prefer an

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unknown weapon over a new model of rifle. When the Belgians later reviewed this decision, it was too late to manufacture the necessary number.

For the Army's motorisation, the order was changed from Vickers Carden Lloyd small self-propelled tractors to two hundred T13 self-propelled guns of 5 tons with open fighting compartment and carrying a 4.7 cm gun; and forty-five 6-ton T15 fully armored tanks, but armed only with a 13.2 mm machine gun, that equipped the two cavalry divisions and the 1st Division of Chasseurs Ardennais. To have real fighting tanks available, in 1937 the Ministry acquired twelve Renault ACG-1 tanks of 16 tons. Immediately this prompted heated discussions in Parliament, where some claimed that the tank, an offensive weapon, should not be used by a neutral country. In military matters it seemed it was the same as in medical matters: 'we speak the loudest about that which we know the least'. As it transpired, the twelve tanks were left unmaintained and in the open air at the Carels factory in Ghent. During mobilisation and hidden from the parliamentairians by calling them armoured cars, eight tanks were secretely re-armed with a 4.7 cm gun and a 13.2 mm machine gun. Four of them were allocated to the Guides and four to the Lancers so as not to show favouritism.

On mobilisation the number of infantry divisions was doubled: twelve divisions of infantry and two divisions of Chasseurs Ardennais, although only the first of the latter was motorised. To increase the combat value of this expanded force, the six active infantry divisions exchanged one active regiment for one reserve and vice versa with the six reserve divisions. The fighting strength of the twelve infantry divisions, each composed of three infantry regiments each with three rifle battalions and a fourth heavy weapons battalion; an artillery regiment of four battalions, each of three batteries with four guns each; and a reconnaissance cyclist squadron, was armed with:

324 light machine guns;
144 machine guns;
36 76mm mortars;
60 47mm anti-tank guns;
48 artillery pieces.

To increase the size of the mobilised Army, the Ministry also called up six second-line reserve divisions, formed with soldiers of the older classes. The divisions were numbered from 13 to 18. This was sound in principle, since the country was in danger, and so the Minister took the necessary steps to call up this reserve. While this solved one problem, he was unable to solve a second: the shortage of modern weapons. The second-line reserve divisions had no 47mm anti-tank guns nor 76mm mortars.

They had only twenty-four pieces of artillery instead of forty-eight. The Mauser 1889 rifle, used in the 1914-1918 war, was used instead of the 1935 model rifle; the Colt 1917-1918 machine gun was used in lue of the Maxim machine-gun and the light machine-gun 1915-1927, a weapon prone to constant jamming, was used instead of the light machine-gun model 1930. The modification of the light machine-gun 1915-1927 to allow for the use of the model 1930 ammunition tended to further increase the number of malfunctions. Only the reconnaissance unit was larger: a group of three squadrons, and an additional machine gun squadron, instead of one squadron as in the first twelve infantry divisions. This only advantage would, however, be made void from the beginning of mobilisation because these reconnaissance battalions were detached to serve on the border as screening troops and never rejoined their parent divisions.

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The Command intended to employ these Second-Line Reserve Divisions on missions more suited to their lack of training and weapons, such as Coast Guard or in quiet sectors. This was perfect in theory, but in practice when things went wrong all types of divisions were sent into the front line. The morale of these poorly trained soldiers was then sorely trested.

In 1937, despite the misgivings of some die-hard cavalymen, the Cavalry Corps was fully motorised and the horses retired. On mobilisation the cavalry fielded:

- Two cavalry divisions including:
- Three motorised regiments mounted on motorcycles and sidecars;
- Two regiments of Carabinier Cyclistes on bicycles;
- A motorised artillery regiment;
- A separate motorcycle-mounted brigade (2nd Guides and 4th Lancers);
- An additional artillery regiment held at corps level.

The Belgian artillery was not so lucky when it came to re-armament. Its equipment was still largely that of 1914-1918: the 75mm quick-firing gun of 1907, the 75mm high-power gun of the earlier war, French equipment such as the 105 mm long barrel model 1913, the 155mm howitzer and 220mm mortar from 1916, the 6-inch British howitzer, and several heavy guns obtained from the German Army after 1918. Only the 105 mm howitzer and the 120 mm towed gun, both of Belgian manufacture, could be considered modern armaments. The replacement of artillery equipment was very expensive because it also involved the acquisition of considerable stocks of ammunition. The multitude of different artillery pieces greatly complicated the supply of ammunition and repair parts during wartime. Except for the artillery of the Cavalry Corps (17th, 18th, 19th Regiments), and that of the Chasseurs Ardennais (20th Regiment), the light and medium guns remained horse-drawn.

Many factors delayed the motorisation of the artillery:
- the shortage of numerous types of vehicle drivers;
- Carriage stocks and harnesses already in the depots;
- The large quantity of horses that could be requisitioned in the country;
- The uncertainty of fuel availability for vehicles;
- The fact that horse-drawn artillery was sufficiently fast to keep up with marching infantry;
- Finally, the equivalent reliance on horse-drawn artillery regiments in Germany.

The telephone and line equipment was also defective, the available field phones being frankly unusable, so a program to replace them was begun during mobilisation. As for the radio equipment, it only worked intermittadly, but even then with quite a lot of difficulties.

At mobilisation, the gendarmerie formed two motorised regiments called light regiments. Theoretically this was understandable given the need to strengthen and relieve combat units, but the measure proved disastrous in practice because of the absence of 2,400 gendarmes out of a total of 8,200 law enforcement officers, even when training personnel were incorporated as supplementary constables. During the campaign, the lack of gendarmes for the maintenance of discipline was sorely felt because any army is made up of three categories of men:

- Those who do their duty to the end;
- Those who do so provided all others are theirs;
- Those who prefer to leave this duty to others.

As soldiers tended to act with regard for their personal safety, they needed to be made aware of the

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existence of military tribunals and courts, and needed to regularly see the military police responsible for providing ‘clients’. When this restriction to lax discipline did not exist, demoralised units collapsed, leaving only motivated soldiers, who in turn fell victims to the broader lack of discipline across the army.

Anti-aircraft defence was also not sufficient and this was a major factor in the disaster. The modern equipment that was available proved woefully inadequate:
To protect all of the twenty-two divisions and all the rear services of the Belgian Army there were only:
- Twenty-four groups each of twelve 75mm guns;
- Eighteen batteries each with six 40 mm guns;
For the defence of cities, factories, bridges, railway stations, etc:
- A group of twelve guns of 90 mm;
- Eight batteries each of six 40mm guns.

It was therefore accepted that the regiments would usually only have their light machine guns and their heavy machine guns on tripods to protect themselves.

As for the Belgian Air Force, it only had sixty-nine modern aircraft amongst its total of one hundred and eighty. So most of the Belgian pilots took to the air in obsolete aircraft. The Army Command put its faith in French and British aviation, a calculation based on hope but one that forgot that in war everyone looks after themselves as their first priority.

In summary, the six second-line reserve divisions, almost one-third of the infantry, were poorly armed, two thirds of the planes were obsolete, and anti-aircraft defence was not reliably available.

Why were the necessary credits not granted in time? In Belgium, the power of auto-suggestion for what they hoped for was so great that the responsible people could deny reality. The Belgians prefered to run the biggest risks without paying any insurance even though the Army was the assurance of Belgium’s national existence. Finally, by ideology or interest, some claimed that the neglect of Belgium’s defence would actually prevent danger or that international conferences could be relied on to prevent future war. But speeches by the kilometer and resolutions by the ton never prevented a gun from firing. Thus, by refusing to face facts, the Belgians condemned their sons to be killed without being given the chance to protect their families.

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Chapter IV

The Strengthening of the Standing Army

After Hitler took power in 1933, contingency plans were devised, and measures put in place, to resist a sudden attack on border garrisons. In Liege, regarded as likely to be immedietly threatened, all the troops came back to the left bank of the Meuse to make this plan even simpler, but their leaders then unwisely overloaded them with so many chores and secondary tasks that the plan then became difficult to execute given the number of men and horses available in barracks.

In the forts, where the soldiers slept and rested in barracks in proximity to their battle positions as a measure of safety, the alert drills usually took place in two stages; first, all the soldiers fell-in at their combat post, and then immediately left the fort to go back and get their equipment from the barracks.

Frontier Cyclists, Chasseurs Ardennais and Fortress Troops permanently occupied bunkers, especially those responsible for controlling demolitions. Given the lack of depth in some units, lieutenants from other regiments came to supplement and to take responsibility in the event of hostilities.

At the camp near the border at Elsenborn, the artillery regiments rotated with each another, not daring to concentrate there as three regiments had normally done in the past. When the regiments of the III Corps, normally quartered in the provinces of Liege and Limburg, went to the ranges at Beverlo, they were replaced in their garrisons by infantry battalions formed from regiments initially deployed in reserve, a measure detrimental to the rapid mobilisation of the latter.

In 1937, a large training exercise was conducted around Liege by the III Corps, which was raised to war readiness for the activity by calling up two additional militia classes.

Because of the need to maintain troops constantly on operational rotations at all times, the regimental headquarters were kept from being on a war footing or were in reality training centers for recruits.

This last solution, applied before 1940, had the disadvantage of requiring mobilisation before going to war, but had the advantage of allowing a large number of active officers and non-commissioned officers to practice their command responsibilities, because leading troops could not be learned by reading books any more than swimming or riding could be.

Mobilisation was a complicated operation. It completely disrupted the regiments before allowing them to focus on their war roles, and accordingly distracted them throughout its duration. It had to therefore be carried out as quickly as possible, especially near the borders where additional security measures were required.

In 1938, the mobilisation was carried out in two stages as in 1914:

1st Peacetime Reinforcement of Regular Troops: the recall of five classes to form, with the class under-going training, the units of the first line, that is to say twelve divisions of infantry, two divisions of Chasseurs Ardennais, two divisions of cavalry, a brigade of mounted cavalrymen, the

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Fortress Troops and the Army Artillery.

2nd General Mobilisation: reminder of other classes available for the six second-line infantry divisions, Auxiliary Troops, Services, etc.

The Army then amounted to:

4,800 active and 16,500 reserve officers, 30,000 career volunteers, 47,000 annual militiamen and 500,000 recalled.

During the Peacetime Reinforcement, each active regiment mobilised itself by creating a reserve regiment of the same composition. For example, an artillery regiment usually consisted of four groups with two batteries in peacetime; during peactime reinforcement it transformed into four groups with three batteries while forming a second reserve regiment of the same composition: thus eight batteries during peace formed twenty-four for war. If in peacetime the active cadres were complete, which they generally were not, each battery should have consisted of three officers and eight non-commissioned officers for a third of the men and half of the horses normally required for war establishment. So at the end of this first mobilisation phase, only one officer and two or three NCOs from the active side remained at each unit. This explanation is very simplified because it does not take into account the new staffs that also needed to be created.

On 12 September 1938, while the III Corps was at the Beverlo and Elsenborn ranges, Adolf Hitler once again gave an indication of his future plans at the annual Nazi Party Day in Nuremberg. His speech demanded an end to the 'tyranny' imposed by the Czechs on the 3,500,000 German-speaking inhabitants of the Sudetenland.

Nazi supporters provoked violence in Prague. The German Army mobilised in the neighboring regions of Czechoslovakia, urgently requisitioned civilian horses, cars, trucks, etc., while fortification work was accelerated on the Siegfried Line facing Belgium, Luxembourg and France.

The active French regiments were brought up to their war establishment and two reserve classes were recalled in the Netherlands for a period of fifteen days.

Everyone trembled, yet Germany had only thirty-six divisions of infantry and four divisions of tanks, while behind formidable fortifications Czechoslovakia had twenty-six, Poland thirty and France thirty-four. But England, whilst powerful at sea, had no troops ready to embark for the continent.

To avoid war at any cost, the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain sent Lord Runciman to Czechoslovakia to solve the problem, that is, to dismember an ally for the benefit of a potential enemy.

The German example became contagious: Poland turned about and claimed the Czech region of Teschen and Hungary followed suit. Faced with these successive abandonments, Czechoslovakia declared itself ready for terms 'pressured by so-called friends and allies' and on 22 September 1938 Neville Chamberlain flew to Godesberg to confer with Hitler.

As it was assumed that German demands would be unacceptable, mobilisation efforts were intensified in Germany, France and the Netherlands. The Belgians moved to Stage 1 of mobilisation,

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Peace-time Reinforcement, at 1400 hours on 27 September 1938, and immediately the regiments of III Army Corps entrained to travel to their mobilisation concentration points near their garrisons.

That same night, without waiting for the arrival of the troops, the trucks from the depots unloaded the armaments, signals equipment, individual packs of the recalled reserves, and horses' harnesses into the magazines and warehouses of the cantonments.

When the reserves arrived and disembarked from the trains, half of the active cadre left to form reserve regiments. Arriving at their cantonments, the active cadre found the recalled reserves already there, and immediately everyone worked together with plenty of goodwill. Requisitioned horses were called in to the concentration centers in the afternoon, under the direction of the gendarmes. By the evening almost all of the recalled reserves had joined; in the following days medical certificates justified the absense of those who were missing.

The total of the recalled reserve officers was sufficient, as was the number of recalled soldiers. In regard to non-commissioned officers, however, the shortfall was considerable, with some units receiving only a third of the required figure. Similarly, the requisition process only provided half of the expected number of horses.

Equipment was not complete, because, with all the units being mobilised at the same time, the depots could not hide their missing equipment by making loans to each other as they had during the periodic recall of reserve units, but what was available was in good condition. Some harnesses, too short for the big horses from Hesbaye, were lengthened by means of ropes and telephone wire.

The morale of the recalled reserves was excellent, all happy to be reunited with their comrades in the barracks. These joyous reunions were celebrated with a drink, and between chores they indulged at cafes. From the first day the lack of non-commissioned officers was sorely felt, especially trained regulars.

The units left to occupy their battle positions at 1400 hours on 29 September. Some artillery batteries had to move their equipment in multiple trips for lack of horses. By 1000 hours on the 30th, trucks had unloaded the ammunition at the guns, but at 1500 hours an order was received to suspend operations and to return the ammunition.

The danger of war had been temporarily averted after a conference held in Munich between Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Edward Daladier and Neville Chamberlain but that had excluded the Czech ministers, who were relegated to a nearby room.

At 0100 hours on the 30th, everything had been ceded to Hitler, even more than anticipated by his 'unacceptable' demands at Godesberg. Czechoslovakia yielded 228,000 inhabitants and 1,700 square kilometers to Poland; 772,000 inhabitants and 19,500 km^2 to Hungary; 3,600,000 inhabitants and 28,600 km^2 and all its fortifications to Germany. Czech-speaking citizens were forced to immediately leave these territories, abandoning their property and their animal herds.

In compensation, Czechoslovakia received a guarantee from France and England for the lands that Hitler had the good grace to leave it. It was the triumph of cowardice and an official recognition of the invincibility of the German Army.

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On 1 October 1938, Belgian units returned to demobilise in the same cantonments they had left. On Sunday, 2 October, while the horses were sent back to the requisition centers, the demobilisation orders flowed. Judging that the cost of materiel lost by a rapid demobilisation lower than the cost per day of maintaining the troops at war readinness, the Belgian Government decided to cut its losses and instantly released the recalled reserves.

This hasty action led to the immediate dissolving of regiments. The unit commanders paid the soldiers, and signed their open-ended leave forms, while the active soldiers strove to recover as much equipment as possible. A flood of khaki choked the roads as the soldiers flocked to the stations, where military trains dispersed the troops to return them to their homes.

In active regiments, the soldiers participated in the search for abandoned materiel. In reserve regiments, one officer and two non-commisioned officers were usually all that was available to do the same. Machine-guns were found on sidewalks along with discarded pairs of boots; in the barns lay the horse blankets and harness parts, etc. Three days later, at 1100 hours on Wednesday 5 October, a farmer from Vreren telephoned the Army at Liège complaining that horses, an ambulance van, medical boxes, harnesses, and individual bags were still cluttering up his buildings because the doctor, the medics, the drivers, all recalled reservists, returned home having abandoned everything.

The Peace Reinforcement ended with another lesson in indiscipline for Belgium's soldiers who really did not need any additional exposure to poor leadership and management. As for the depots, they took the opportunity to record as losses all their missing material.

To improve the mobilisation process, the Belgian General Staff asked each unit commander for a report with suggestions for improvement. Following this study, any future mobilisation would take place in five phases:

Phase A. Peace Reinforcement of Active Units;
Phase B. Remainder of First-Line Divisions in the Eastern Provinces;
Phase C. Remainder of other First-Line divisions;
Phase D. Remainder of Second-LIne Reserve Divisions;
Phase E. General mobilisation.

The decision was also taken to modernise Belgian aviation and increase its anti-air defence.

All of Belgium's neighbours, however, were understandably stretched to the maximum extent to meet their own requirements, and had little available to offer. US factories were over-booked with orders and could no longer accept additional. Only Hitler kindly offered Czechoslovakian planes of an outdated model, because, unsatisfied even with the capitulation resulting from Munich, his troops invaded the rest of the country at 0600 hours on 15 March 1939, dismembering Czechoslovakia and creating by German decree the protectorate of Bohemia-Moravia, an independent Slovakia, and the cession of Ruthenia to Hungary. Thus the Skoda factories became available to produce armaments for Germany.

This time the Belgians did not mobilise because France and England, forgetting their guarantee to Czechoslovakia given only a year earlier, were content with a protest.

Since the Allies no longer seemed capable of resisting, Italy quietly annexed Albania on 10 April

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1939.

So at last, when it was probably already too late, Great Britain introduced conscription, but of the 220,000 men in the first contingent, 88,000 were reserved for the anti-aircraft defence of the island.

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Second Part

THE 18 DAY CAMPAIGN

CHAPTER V

MOBILISATION

In the summer of 1939, Adolf Hitler made little secret of his desire to settle in his own way the ‘problem’ of the Polish corridor between Old Prussia and the rest of Germany.

In the face of Germany and Italy, who were now united by the 'steel pact', France and England urgently sought allies, but the fate of Czechoslovakia did not attract them any takers.

On 11 August 1939, an Allied military mission landed in Moscow to devise a rather complicated plan: in case of war, Russia should attack Germany but to do so without entering Poland, that country forming a barrier between the two countries.

During these talks, the German-Russian Pact of Non-Aggression was signed on 23 August 1939, providing for the partition of Poland and the annexation of the Baltic States by Russia. The Russian danger thus averted, on 1 September 1939, Hitler invaded Poland and, three days later, he received, to his great shock and surprise, a declaration of war from England, and one from France.

Belgian mobilisation continued and was considered to proceed much better than the year before. Phase A started on 26 August, moved to Phase B on the 28th, given the speed of events, and then straight to Phase C on 1 September when German troops entered Poland. Phase D was in two parts: 11 September for the 14th and 16th divisions; 20 September for the 13th, 15th and 18th divisions and 7 November for the 17th Division. As for Phase E, general mobilisation, this was not triggered until 10 May 1940.

Divisions settled into defensive positions on the Albert Canal and the Meuse. In the border zone in front of this position, at Turnhout, Maaseik, and Arlon, the cyclists and motorised troops established themselves in covered positions to execute demolitions and to delay the enemy advance.

As the withdrawal of the Army had to be planned for in case of failure on the Albert Canal-Meuse position, from 1 September 1939 the High Command began constructing a second line of defence, 80 km long, between Antwerp and Namur, through Koningshooikt, Wavre, Ottignies, Gembloux, and Suarlée: three lines of concrete bunkers formed strong points with trenches and networks of wire, connected by buried telephone lines. It was to be covered over its entire length by four to five obstacle belts, also of barbed wire, and by a continuous anti-tank obstacle: a steel wall constructed by the individual 'Cointet' obstacles linked to each other. This line was called by the Belgians the 'KW Line' (Koningshooikt-Wavre) and by the Allies the 'Dyle Position'.

Further back, a national redoubt was prepared, designated the 'Ghent Bridgehead': along the Terneuzen Canal and the River Lys, Ghent was planned to be protected by a defensive belt with

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bunkers, wire obstacles and Cointet obstacles.

Given Belgian's neutral stance, work was also undertaken to create a defensive line facing France, with bunkers and obstacles from Wavre to Ninove, via Rixensart, Mont-Saint-Jean, and Hal.

The news of the war was read with great interest by the Belgian people from the very first day: the torpedoing of the liner *Athenia*, demoralisation of the German soldiers cowering in the Siegfried line, bunkers cluttered with ammunition, the German Army's lightning advance in Poland, and the French offensive in the Warndt Forest.

In the Polish campaign, the German Army under General von Brauchitsch employed all its armored, motorised and light divisions, forty-four active infantry divisions out of fifty-two as well as most of the Luftwaffe.

Surprised while in the midst of mobilisation, the Polish Marshal Rydz Smigly had only twenty-four infantry divisions out of thirty-nine, ten out of eleven cavalry brigades and one out of two motorised brigades at combat readiness.

The Poles were crushed in a pincer movement between General von Bock's Army Group North, aided by Kesselring's 1st Luftflotte, and General von Rundstedt's Southern Army Group, supported by Löhr's 4th Luftflotte.

The Poles fought bravely, sometimes bordering on madness, like the Pomorska cavalry brigade charging General Geyr von Schweppenburg's 3rd Panzer Division in the Grudziadz area[1]. But their planes were destroyed, their cities bombed, and their troops crushed. The Russian Army attacked on 17 September. Warsaw fell on the 23rd and Poland was dismembered. Of note for future reference, there were no newspaper reports of parachute operations.

On the other German front the situation was less than ideal. The Siegfried Line was really just another of Hitler's bluffs. To meet the deadlines imposed, the construction of bunkers had not been well thought through; they were not heavy-artillery-proof, and many had been cast without a loophole or embrasure.

To defend this inadequate series of fortification from Aachen to Basle, General von Leeb only had eight active and twenty-five reserve divisions. These last had insufficient weapons and only rudimentary training, almost all had never fired their weapons and there was ammunition for only three days at the most. Imagining the probable offensive of the French Army, with their ninety divisions, 2,500 armored vehicles and 10,000 guns, the general was hardly confident. Moreover, to avoid incidents between belligerents, Hitler had denied any reconnaissance overflights of the allied territories during the Polish campaign.

In Paris, the Polish military attaché was as persistent for French action as the Czech ministers had been during Munich the year before. Finally, Generalissimo Gamelin gave orders to seize the Warndt Forest, and allocated nine divisions for the offensive.

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[1] Translator's note: this was widely believed to be the case, and is often quoted as a senseless charge by horsed cavalry against tanks, but post-war research confirms that the Polish cavalry were neutralised in an air attack and the story of cavalry charging tanks was concocted by German propaganda

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On the night of 6 / 7 September 1939, the French crossed the border without encountering strong resistance and in the course of a week they seized twenty abandoned villages, littered with booby-traps and other devices. Then, on the 13th, they adopted a defensive posture because the events in Poland prompted Generalissime Gamelin to propose halting the offensive to the Supreme Council Anglo-French. This decision had the rare gift of simultaneously satisfying both friends and enemies.

A month later, on 16 October, the Germans reclaimed their villages without encountering any resistance with a few battalion attacks, and then stoped politely at the frontier posts. Apart from the disappearance of Poland, everyone had returned to their starting point.

As early as October, the German troops, returned from Poland, were deployed to the Rhineland and the Luftwaffe reappeared with more and more numerous overflights.

On 13 October, Colonel BEM Goethals, the Belgian military attaché in Berlin, reported that German bookshops were sending to the military depots at Munster and Wiesbaden all city plans and road maps they had available of France, Belgium and Holland.

On 6 November 1939, eighty-five German divisions had been identified by the intelligence service, of which thirty were between Cleves and Treves. Panzer divisions were on the border, the further requisition of civilian cars and trucks had begun, leave passes had been cancelled and active divisions were replacing Landswehr border battalions along the border. The Belgian Embassy in Berlin passed the news that the Germans planned to attack on the night of 11 / 12 November 1939.

Immediately, the Belgians were on the alert. Leave was cancelled and officers on leave were recalled. Then the night passed calmly, with no more alarming news, and the danger seemed to have receded. Leave passes were reinstated.

With time, the Belgian Army was slowly improving. The officer cadre counted one active officer for every four from the reserve.

While the Reservists learnt the trade well in the units, the staffs often thought themselves invested with the authority of their chief or they survived in headquarters by being sycophants. The Army should have trained many more reserve officers so as to more easily replace the unsatisfactory. On the battlefield, commanders had to be able to count on reserve officers just as they could a regular. Efforts were made to improve education. Courses were organised for reserve officers and non-commissioned-officers, artillery groups passed successively through the newly created Helchteren Range, and divisions rotated through Beverlo Camp.

But the troops were still not being trained for endurance marches, first because defensive works required the displacement of thousands of tons of earth, then by the abnormally low winter temperature. As during the 1914-1918 war, the Ministry established a standard leave regime of five days a month. The food was generally good, and the staff spent some time studying the best types of field cookers. Clothing, and especially boots, often left something to be desired, because, despite the depots' precautions, the hardened leather cracked, and the seams gave way. Repairs, both for boots and harnesses, were abnormally numerous and the replacement of faulty boots entailed lengthy delays. The quality of soldiers' lodgments depended largely on the location of their cantonment. At first, schools and theaters were requisitioned. When it was necessary to vacate them, the hospitality

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of the local citizens alleviated many problems. Moreover, wooden barracks were soon under construction near the main positions. For horses, on the other hand, the return of winter cattle to their stables created a near-disaster. In the Campine region in north-eastern Belgium, two or three horses were agisted per farm, making it difficult to keep track of them from a single cantonment. Like the additional barracks, it was also necessary to construct additional wooden stables. When the supply system did not provide the necessary fodder, the batteries requested it from the local communities. The mayors then rightly claimed compensation from the military authorities.

If the duration of the mobilisation period made it possible to strengthen the field fortifications, it also disorganised and demoralised the Army. Under pressure from parliamentarians, the Government granted a series of personnel releases for soldiers from critical trades:

- Miners in October 1939 and thus, considering the nature of regional recruitment, a regiment recruited from Hainaut alone loses 700 men;
- Mining engineers, and so officers from the artillery and especially engineers returned, many responsible for frontier demolitions;
- Fathers of three or more children, to whom it would have been preferable to simply pay a special allowance;
- Members of the health service; nevertheless in time of war they would return to the army in spite of the casualties suffered by the civilian population;
- Training command personnel who could have been temporarily replaced by those who had recently retired;
- Specialist government officials, beginning with those controlling finances and ending with those from local districts, under the pretext of requisitions to be regulated;
- Skilled workmen needed by industry. But the number of skills was large and growing, with the lure of returning home;
- Finally, on 4 April 1940, farmers received a 10-day leave pass, so that the number of men present at units dropped in many instances to 75%.

If Hitler had not waited, his troops would certainly have been surprised at the Albert Canal: they would have found nobody there!

The first result of these releases was a progressive disorganisation of the whole Army. A large number of reserve officers left. To replace them, the artillery and engineering had the opportunity to promote NCOs based on their final exam results. In the cavalry and infantry, the problem was insoluble in some regiments, and yet some NCOs had to be promoted to solve the shortage. The cadre of NCOs was further depleted, first by the departure of the personnel released for critical trades, then by the new promotions of NCOs to officers. One month before the war, commanders were given orders to complete their cadre by appointing potential NCOs. Thus, in a battery, a gunner who appeared to be competent, was promoted to sergeant and chief of the gun crew overnight and had to learn the nature of his appointment on the job.

Those who had been given leave passes returned to their units after their time off. Those released for critical trades also presented themselves on the outbreak of hostilities, but to the Centres of Reinforcement and Instruction rather than to their units. To replace the latter, it was necessary to have recourse to the men of the older classes, to the unemployed who felt as tired in the military life

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as at home, and to the recruits after a few months of service, etc. To aggravate this lunacy, replacements were assigned without regard to their qualifications. Thus, units received machine gunners when they needed signals operators, gunners instead of drivers, riflemen for drivers. 'Don't bother asking, we will send you what we have' seemed to have been the attitude.

Senior leaders did not seem to have realised the extent of the disorganisation and the resultant difficulties. Instead of helping their subordinates, they bombarded them with requests for explanations on trivial matters with replies expected by return mail. In September 1939, a period without overflights because of Hitler's restrictions, an order was given for soldiers to always be wearing their helmet, hence an avalanche of demands for explanation every time a soldier was seen without his helmet peeling potatoes or unloading fodder. Ironically, the order was withdrawn at the reappearance of German planes. Embarrassed by their critics in the press, the interventions of parliamentarians and the complaints of civilians, Belgian senior military leaders published policies that sometimes went too far. At the arrival at their defensive positions in September 1939, the men worked with naked torsos, which elicited a note that condemned this severe immoral breach that had offended some bigots. For entertainment during the long winter months, theatrical tours and balls were organised in the cantonments. As sometimes the officer in charge brought more boys than the mayor provided girls, soldiers sometimes danced together, which also produced a policy that forbade such appalling behaviour. From that day onwards, two non-commissioned officers had to patrol every ballroom event as personnel chaperones to stop this national scandal!

One winter night, at 0200 hours, a sentry guarding artillery, saw four shadows, one of which was approaching an ammunition dump. After two challenges, the sentry fired, and the shadows faded away on the run. On receipt of the report, the responsible general demanded a punishment and the captain replied that in conscience he could not order it, the sentinel having acted according to article 86 of the regulations. The general himself inflicted on the sentry eight days of detention and demanded the reimbursement of the fired round; because mobilisation was not the same as war, sentinels now had to make three challenges. The captain paid for the round, the company clerk recorded the punishment in the daily report and the affair ended quietly.

These examples were characteristic of the mentality of some senior officers. Subordinates learnt to do their duty without making trouble for their superiors. On the day the Germans arrived in front of the border bridges, how many challenges needed to be made before proceeding to their destruction? On the other hand, discipline faltered for lack of energy from commanders. When an active officer was convinced that a soldier had sold secret documents to Germany, the soldier coldly killed the officer with a revolver, and the government preferred to bury these 'unimportant' cases for fear of inflaming the press.

The number of sentries abandoning their posts was so high that the tribunals sent them back to the corps headquarters to discipline them and to get rid of them. In the forward cantonments, the only effective punishment was the withholding of leave, but in conscience, could an officer really refuse a soldier the opportunity to see his family when many of his comrades, under the same military obligations, had been released for a long time because of their critical skills? And by dint of these distorted rules and regulations, the whole military machine ended up breaking down.

In addition to the disorganisation of the Army, the release of men for critical jobs created discontent amongst the other soldiers who felt themselves cruelly affected by these injustices. While those released now earnt their normal pay, the soldiers at the front received a pay of thirty centimes a

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day, a sum justifiable under the reign of King Leopold II[2], but insulting in 1940. A recruit was usually helped by his parents, and the men released for critical skills had the support of their families. The pay was raised to one franc, the price of a glass of beer, and the allowance of eight to twelve francs for a wife did not solve the problem for everyone.

As the soldiers suffered from the harsh winter, the injustice felt because of the release of the critical trades, the needs of their families, and the supposed pointless nature of their sacrifice, created the feeling, growing stronger and stronger that could be summarised as: 'If there is really danger, then let everyone be here, but if there is none, let us go home. '

If the press spared no criticism of the Army and its leaders, it continued to lull its readers with the intoxicating illusion that the present international conflict would not affect Belgium. The French tirelessly repeated: 'We will win the war because we are the strongest.' But the Belgian soldiers were skeptical and ended up doubting their strength during the Phony War.

The war was both national and ideological, consequently, as during the wars of Religion and those of the French Revolution, in each camp men were prepared to betray their own country to assist the victory of their newly-adopted ideology. Seys Inquart had done this in Austria; Konrad Henlein followed his example in Czechoslovakia; during this time Vidkun Quisling had been indoctrinating the little Norwegian Army; in Holland Antoon Mussert urged his supporters to help the German invasion, if necessary by force of arms, and in Britain Sir Oswald Mosley languished in prison. In France, the Communists, allied with the Germans since the German-Russian treaty of 1939, waged a tremendous propaganda offensive openly inciting the French soldiers 'not to die for Danzig' and sabotaged the machines making war materiel in the factories. Their leader, Maurice Thorez, called up to his war station with a battalion of sappers, deserted, then traveled via Switzerland and Germany to take refuge in Moscow.

In Belgium, three separate groups threw their support behind Hitler: the Rexists of Leon Degrelle with twenty-one members in Parliament; the VNV (Vlaams Nationaal Verbond) of Staf De Clercq, less strong with sixteen parliamentarians, and Verdinaso (Verenigde Dietse Nationaal Solidaristen) lead by Georges Van Severen and characterised by its Nazi-like ceremonies.

The Government knew that Leon Degrelle and Staf De Clercq were financially supported by foreigners and prohibited remittances, an ineffective measure because the foreign secret services still managed to find a way to provide funds.

The pro-German propaganda of 'Real Country' revealed the true intentions of Leon Degrelle and, as a consequence, many of his followers abandoned him. One of these was the former senator Xavier de Grunne, who was called up as a major in the 5th Chasseurs Ardennais, and subsequently wounded at Deinze. He refused to leave the 2nd Battalion and died on 4 June 1944 in Gross Strelitz.

Thanks to its military organisation created in 1934, Staf De Clercq had trained propagandists in each company, squadron and battery. His newspaper 'Volk en Staat' was distributed in all cantonments, and the Government dared not ban it completely because of concerns over freedom of the press.

The effect of this propaganda was evident in some instances. Demonstrations took place first in

[2] Leopold II reigned as the King of the Belgians from 1865 to 1909

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