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EXILE IN LONDON
THE EXPERIENCE OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND THE OTHER OCCUPIED NATIONS, 1939–1945

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and the Other Occupied Nations, 1939–1945

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INTRODUCTION

Three quarters of a century ago, during the Second World War, the common state of the Czechs and Slovaks existed, from the legal point of view, only in the United Kingdom, where its government-in-exile resided. For the long and arduous six war years, the same was true for Poland. The governments of four Western nations (Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg), as well as those of Greece and Yugoslavia, were moved to London after their countries had been occupied by Nazi Germany in 1940–1941. The capital of Great Britain thus in a way became the capital of free Europe as well.

The individual national stories naturally differed, both in general aspects and in details. Yet, a number of interesting parallels between them can be drawn. Just to mention one example: unlike the other governments, that of Czechoslovakia was created in a revolutionary way, achieving *de jure* recognition from the host country only in July 1941. Yet, it was still undoubtedly a remarkable success for the Czechoslovak representatives to attain this status, especially when compared to the failure of the Free French to achieve similar recognition.

Intensive research conducted in the archives, especially in the last three decades, has enabled us to observe and study the story of the European exile in London from a more detached and a more historical perspective. We are thus now in a position to wage a more profound debate not only about the political and military issues, but also about the various economic and social aspects of the individual stories of the governments-in-exile as well as about everyday life in the exile in general. To avoid national self-centrism, the Czechoslovak case needs to be analyzed in the international context and particularly in comparison with the cases of other countries whose governments found refuge in London.

To stimulate and abet such a debate, the British-Czech-Slovak Historians' Forum invited leading scholars in the field to a conference that took place in the Czernin Palace, the seat of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, from 6 to 7 June 2013. It was preceded by the annual Bruce Lockhart Lecture delivered by Richard Overy, on the topic of *British Political Warfare and Occupied Europe*, symbolically in the Thun Palace, the seat of the British Embassy in Prague. The conference itself was divided into five panels in which more than 20 historians from nine countries focused on various aspects of exile politics,

the importance of armies-in-exile, the preparation of the post-war solution for the issue of minorities as well as the problem of media, education and propaganda in exile.

Eighteen participants eventually delivered their chapters for this volume while the special lecture by Richard Overy is also included. Of course, the authors could profit from the vast array of relevant literature on the topic of the exile, from which at least the collective monograph *Europe in Exile*, published in 2001, must be mentioned.[1] On the other hand, the research has moved forward further in the last one-and-a-half decades since that book was published. In particular, the authors of the current volume could make use of the large quantity of newly-released documents in their efforts to answer some crucial and intriguing historical questions. Their chapters thus seek the common characteristics and differences in the origin and structure of the individual exile representations in London, the ways in which the governments-in-exile dealt with their pressing social and economic problems and, of course, several of them strive to set the measure in which the governments-in-exile were able to influence crucial allied diplomatic negotiations.

There is no doubt that the Polish, Yugoslav and later also the Czechoslovak exile leaders failed to achieve their primary war aims as the introductory chapter by Detlef Brandes clearly demonstrates and those by Anita Prażmowska, Vít Smetana and also Radosław Żurawski vel Grajewski all but underline. But were they the only "losers" or can any similarities with the fate of the Western statesmen-in-exile and their plans be observed? The chapters by Chantal Kesteloot and Albert Kersten on the Belgian and Dutch exiles respectively help to draw a more colourful picture of the alleged "winners" and the others. Victoria Vasilenko, for her part, adds an important chapter on how the story of the exile has been treated by historians. It is all the more significant in that it deals with the ways that Russian (and Soviet) historiography has treated the topics of the Polish and Czechoslovak exiles, whose fate the Soviet Union had once affected so dramatically, in the politically most turbulent last three decades – that is from the *glasnost* period in the late 1980s to the Putin era.

The book *Europe in Exile* contained several chapters focusing on the role the military forces of several countries played in the exile. Another study of the topic, called *Exile Armies*, appeared three years later.[2] In contrast, this volume offers a truly comparative chapter by Zdenko Maršálek that assesses the relative importance of not only armies, but also of all the strategic

1 Martin Conway – José Gotovitch, eds., *Europe in Exile: European Exile Communities in Britain 1940–1945* (New York – Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001).

2 Matthew Bennett – Paul Latawski, eds., *Exile Armies* (Houndmills, NH – New York: Palgrave, 2004).

commodities and equipment which particular governments-in-exile were able to offer for the allied war effort. Moreover, Maršálek's chapter clearly demonstrates how some of the problems faced by the exile representations, such as the problem of achieving maximum effectiveness from small armed forces, are topical even today, within the framework of current allied forces. This comparative view is fittingly supplemented by Blaž Torkar's detailed chapter on the Yugoslav armed forces in exile and their political importance, since probably no other country represented such a divergence of changing governments-in-exile and their (as well as Allied) attitudes to the resistance structures at home. The resistance activity in the occupied countries themselves was at least equally as important for Allied warfare as the military units in exile were. Yet, to achieve real efficiency, this had to be supported by the governments-in-exile in cooperation with the pertinent British authorities who provided weapons, ammunition and logistical support. The chapter by Mark Seaman represents an interesting probe into this broad topic as it points out the various practical problems entailed in British support for clandestine operations in such a far-away country as Czechoslovakia.

One of the major war aims of the Czechoslovak government-in-exile was to prevent the internal disintegration of the state in the future. The preparation of the post-war solution for the issue of minorities is thus deservedly a topic of three chapters. Those by Jan Kuklík with Jan Němeček on the one hand and by Matěj Spurný on the other differ slightly in their conclusions, thus reflecting the fact that discussion on this sensitive topic continues. Martin Brown's chapter assesses the ways this theme has been treated by English language historiography while René Petráš's brief contribution, the only one which is not devoted to exile problems, sets the issue into the historical context of the inter-war treatment of minorities.

Four chapters (those by Richard Overy, Erica Harrison, Jan Láníček and Dušan Segeš) deal with various aspects of propaganda, thus appositely demonstrating how significant this weapon was deemed to be not only by the exiles themselves but also by the British for the overall Allied war effort. The process of preparation for the post-war orientation of the liberated country in the important fields of education and culture is then covered in Doubravka Olšáková's chapter.

Of course, not all the national stories are adequately dealt with in this book, not to mention all the important themes. Still, the authors hope that the variety of the topics that really are covered as well as the quality of their treatment will prompt further discussion on the overall exile phenomenon, perhaps not limited to the Second World War, and might thus serve as a further incentive for intensification of research in the area in the future.

Vít Smetana

I. THE EXISTENCE AND CHALLENGES FACED BY THE EXILE GOVERNMENTS IN LONDON

LIMITED INFLUENCE: THE BRITISH AND THE GOVERNMENTS-IN-EXILE OF POLAND, CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND YUGOSLAVIA

DETLEF BRANDES

In this chapter, I provide a comparison of the British influence on three governments-in-exile and examine to what extent the British government used its power to promote its views.[1]

THE COMPOSITION AND POLITICAL ORIENTATION OF THE THREE GOVERNMENTS-IN-EXILE

Though the British government had great influence on the composition and political orientation of the Polish, Czechoslovak, and Yugoslav governments-in-exile, it used its power resolutely only in the case of Poland. Together with the French it forced a change of government from the pre-wartime *Sanacja* movement to a broad coalition of the former opposition parties with some moderate politicians from the old regime included. On three occasions Britain vetoed the removal of the Polish Prime Minister, General Władysław Eugeniusz Sikorski: once in June 1940 after the loss of the greater part of the Polish army in France, again in July 1941 during negotiations with the Soviet Union on the re-establishment of diplomatic relations, and, finally, in April 1943 after the withdrawal of the Polish divisions from Soviet territory. Britain not only relied upon Sikorski's popularity within Poland itself and on his competence and efficiency in government affairs, but also on his willingness to compromise with the Soviet Union. After his death it accepted the appointment of General Kazimierz Sosnkowski, a follower of Piłsudski, as Commander-in-Chief of the Polish army, since it wanted to avoid a crisis similar to that which had occurred in the Greek and Yugoslav armies, and, on

1 The paper is based on my study *Großbritannien und seine osteuropäischen Alliierten 1939-1943. Die Regierungen Polens, der Tschechoslowakei und Jugoslawiens im Londoner Exil vom Kriegsausbruch bis zur Konferenz in Teheran* (München: Oldenbourg, 1988). It was translated into Czech under the title *Exil v Londýně 1939-1943. Velká Britanie a její spojenci Československo, Polsko a Jugoslavie mezi Mnichovem a Teheránem* (Praha: Karolinum, 2003). Since this chapter is to a great extent a very short summary of my books with 607 and 566 pages respectively, I will add footnotes only when I quote other publications.

the political front, backed Stanisław Mikołajczyk, leader of the Peasant Party, whom it was expected would also make concessions to the Soviet Union.[2]

In the case of Czechoslovakia, Edvard Beneš asserted himself despite opposition from France and partly also from Britain because of his many supporters among the political émigrés. The Slovak Milan Hodža, who had won a reputation as a proponent of far-reaching confederation plans for Eastern Europe, was not consistently supported by the British, despite their own confederation plans. Behind the façade of the Czechoslovak government and the so-called State Council, Beneš systematically built up a dominant position. This was only challenged by the Communists following the first Soviet military victories. The British government did not champion any of his competitors and was surprised when the official institutions of the Czechoslovak exile lost their internal political balance. A belated attempt to use the Foreign Minister, Jan Masaryk, as a conservative counterweight to the pro-Soviet orientation of the Czechoslovak government-in-exile and State Council failed because of his weakness and indecisiveness.

The Foreign Office defended General Dušan Simović, the symbol of Yugoslav resistance and sacrifice for the Allied cause, against the attacks of the King, the queen mother, and his fellow ministers only until January 1942. Although King Peter and the Yugoslav government, shaken especially by the *Ustaša* terror within occupied Yugoslavia, depended totally on British support, the Foreign Office hesitated to confront the clique of ministers, diplomats, and officers with Great Serbian inclinations and did not force through a new cabinet ready for attempts at conciliation in the national conflicts and at social reforms. Instead of demanding such a new cabinet, it was content with a series of half-hearted changes in the composition of the Yugoslav exile apparatus. Annoyed by the internal dissensions among Yugoslav politicians, the British eventually in August 1943 accepted a government of civil servants whose most important members had made their career under the dictatorship of Peter's father, Alexander. The Foreign Office stuck to this solution, even though a group of younger politicians had just united against the Serbian and Croatian extremists and offered a democratic alternative. Only in July 1944, which was much too late, was a government headed by the moderate Croat, Ivan Šubašić, appointed.[3]

With the westward advance of the Soviet armies, British influence on the three governments-in-exile diminished. It could only achieve the temporary inclusion of some democratic ministers in the new Yugoslav and Polish governments dominated by the Communists. On the other hand,

2 Eugeniusz Duraczyński, *Rząd Polski na uchodźstwie 1939-1945. Organizacja, Personalia, Polityka* (Warszawa: Książka a Wiedza, 1993), pp. 240–242.

3 Dragovan Šepić, *Vlada Šubašića* (Zagreb: Globus, 1983).

Beneš anticipated Soviet wishes and appointed in Košice in eastern Slovakia a new government, in which Communists occupied almost one third of the ministries.[4]

GREAT BRITAIN AND THE EXILE ARMIES

Britain expected the governments-in-exile to recruit troops abroad and to support and control the resistance movements in their occupied home countries. In both respects the Polish government maintained a big lead over the other governments-in-exile. When the war began, it could rely on a colony of Polish workers in France and on the military units which had fled to Romania and Hungary following the lost September campaign. Upon Soviet entry into the war, the Polish government could also mobilize some of those prisoners of war and civilians who had been deported to the Soviet Union following Soviet occupation of eastern Poland.

The Czechoslovak army-in-exile was significantly smaller. Up until June 1941 it suffered from the refusal of the former fighters in the Spanish Civil War to take up arms in a so-called "imperialistic war on both sides." The British had of course no influence on the Czechoslovak units organized from 1942 on Soviet soil or on the Polish division mobilized after the departure of the Anders Army in late 1942. The Polish and Czechoslovak units in the West were engaged by the British in Africa, Italy, and Western Europe. Their pilots played an important role in the "Battle of Britain."

As the Yugoslav government did not succeed in evacuating at least part of the Yugoslav army prior to the sudden capitulation in April 1941, its forces were extremely small. They were filled with Slovene prisoners of war who had Italian citizenship. The Yugoslav units disintegrated when their Serbian officers protested against Simović's dismissal and when the British military authorities in Cairo supported the mutineers. The Yugoslav prisoners of war liberated by the Allies on Italian soil already expected the victory of the communist partisans and refused to submit to the discredited Yugoslav government.[5]

4 Toman Brod, *Osudný omyl Edvarda Beneše 1939–1948. Československá cesta do sovětského područí* [The Fateful Error of Edvard Beneš. Czechoslovakia's Road to Soviet Domination] (Praha: Academia, 2002).

5 Detlef Brandes, "Slowenische Exilpolitik zwischen Jugoslawien und Mitteleuropa 1941–1945," in *Historik na Moravě. Prof. Jiřímu Malířovi k šedesátinám* (Brno: Matice Moravská, 2009), pp. 555–572.

BRITAIN AND THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS

Only the Poles succeeded in forming an "underground state" with a governmental delegation, a political representation comprising the main parties, and an underground army. The Political Warfare Executive supported the resistance movements with propaganda over the radio; the Special Operations Executive delivered radio transmitters, money, some weapons, and transported parachutists to the resistance, though the governments-in-exile all complained about the insufficient scale of British help. Poles and Czechs were able to establish independent radio links with their homeland, but the British refused to grant the Yugoslavs an uncontrolled code. As a result, the Yugoslav government could not confer confidentially with its Minister of Defence, Draža Mihailović. With British acquiescence, the three underground armies should have confined themselves to acts of sabotage and saved their valuable squads for a general uprising shortly before the withdrawal of the Axis forces, but the uprisings in Warsaw, Central Slovakia and Prague led to defeats with terrible casualties. Since the *Ustaša* regime were practising a policy of wholesale expulsions and extermination, and the communist partisans were actively fighting to liberate some regional areas, the units of the Yugoslav home army, i.e. the *Četnici,* could not wait for an Allied Balkan invasion. The British and Yugoslav governments proclaimed General Draža Mihailović leader of the rebellion in Yugoslavia and the government-in-exile appointed him War Minister. Through this policy they became dependent on one of the competing parties, and what was more, of the Serb nationalist movement. British attempts to influence Mihailović's strategy directly and through military advisers failed. Though they quietly accepted Mihailović's collaboration with Italy, they demanded acts of sabotage especially against German lines of communication. Only after the defeat of the *Četnici* in the Battle of the Neretva in the spring of 1943 did the SOE switch to an initially cautious but later strong support for the partisans. Its effect on the policy of the successful and self-confident Communist Tito, however, was limited.

BRITAIN AND THE POLICIES OF THE GOVERNMENTS-IN-EXILE TOWARDS THE SOVIET UNION

Following the military successes of the Soviet armies, British influence on the governments-in-exile diminished. Relations between Poland and the Soviet Union were not only burdened by centuries of conflict, but also by the Soviet policy of repression and deportation in its occupation zone during the years 1939–1941, the treatment of the deportees in the vast areas of the Soviet Union, and the quarrel over the future common borders. Under British pressure,

the Polish government sought to normalize relations with the Soviet Union after 22 June 1941 by building up a Polish army and welfare organization on Soviet soil. This new start was hindered not only by traditional Soviet distrust of any autonomous movement, but also by British policy. Britain withheld the promised equipment and arms for the Polish eastern army. Initially it demanded a transfer of the Polish divisions to the Caucasus in case of a Soviet collapse and later it wanted to dispatch these divisions to the Near East in order to strengthen its own troops. Sikorski's attempt to steer a middle course by transferring only part of the eastern army was thwarted by an agreement General Władysław Anders and Churchill made with the Soviet leadership.

The British knew that Sikorski was prepared to conclude a compromise with the Soviets with regard to Poland's former eastern provinces, but it did not press him into an early decision so as not to undermine the fighting morale of the Polish troops. The situation changed when the Soviet leadership broke off diplomatic relations with the Polish government, in reaction to the public controversy over the discovery of the corpses of Polish officers near Katyń, and formed the core of an alternative government. Now Great Britain exerted growing pressure on the government-in-exile to recognize the Curzon line as the Polish eastern frontier. As compensation, Churchill offered the Poles extensive territorial gains in the north and west as far as the Oder and Western Neisse including Stettin. When Mikołajczyk finally yielded, his colleagues in the government forced him to resign. Beneš, however, agreed with the British policy of avoiding anything that could endanger relations with the Soviet Union. Already in 1939, he had hinted to the Soviet ambassador in London that he would be prepared to cede the Carpathian Ukraine to the USSR.

THE PLANS FOR THE TRANSFER OF GERMAN MINORITIES[6]

During the Battle of Britain the disposition of the British public to a radical punishment of Germany increased and included support for a territorial reduction of Germany and the expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the German provinces in the east. Eden's visit to Moscow in December 1941 produced a change also in the policy of the War Cabinet towards questions of nationality in East-Central Europe. Stalin had called for the return of the Sudetenland to Czechoslovakia, the cession of East Prussia to Poland, and the annexation of Istria and Venezia Giulia by Yugoslavia.

6 Detlef Brandes, *Der Weg zur Vertreibung. Pläne und Entscheidungen zum "Transfer" der Deutschen aus der Tschechoslowakei und aus Polen* (München: Oldenbourg, 2001 and 2005). In Czech: *Cesta k vyhnání 1938–1945. Plány a rozhodnutí o „transferu" Němců z Československa a z Polska* (Praha: Prostor, 2002).

After his return to London, Eden asked the Foreign Office Research and Press Service to draw up special studies on the question of the German-Polish, the German-Czechoslovak, and the German-Italian-Yugoslav borders, with only secondary attention to be paid to ethnic factors. If the conclusions suggested a need for population transfer, the Service was to submit a second paper based on the Greek-Turkish precedent, and also on the resettlement of the Baltic Germans by Hitler. Earlier in January 1942, the Service had argued that a confederation consisting of Poland after the loss of its eastern territories, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and possibly Austria, if it was to survive without Russian help and be in a position to stand up to post-war Germany, could come into being only if it were strengthened by the addition of East Prussia, Upper Silesia, and the Sudetenland. The Greek experience after the First World War suggested that Germany could cope with a large number of expellees – the figure reached was three to 6.8 million – so long as the transfer was extended over a period of five to 10 years.

In the negotiations between Britain and the Soviet Union after December 1941, the opinions of both countries with regard to the so-called "transfer" of the Germans from East-Central Europe converged. The Foreign Office, however, did not succeed in its efforts to induce Beneš and the leader of the Sudeten Social Democrats to reach a compromise over the question of the scale of the transfer. In July 1942, the British War Cabinet agreed in principle to the transfer of German minorities to Germany after the war. After that decision Beneš resumed his conversations with Wenzel Jaksch. The exiled leader of the Sudeten German Social Democrats accepted Beneš's proposal to expel part of the German population on the basis of their collaboration with the occupiers. At the same time, the British ambassador warned Beneš against applying the criterion of war-guilt on an individual basis, since the resulting number of expellees might be too small. After protracted negotiations, London saw no possibility of changing Moscow's determination to impose a new Polish border at the Oder and the Western Neisse. Of course, other national minorities such as the Ukrainians, Hungarians, and Italians also suffered under the policy to create ethnically homogenous states.[7]

Although the Yugoslav government counted on the expulsion of the German and Hungarian minorities, its main goal was the "liberation" of the Croats and Slovenes residing on pre-war Italian territory. Since the dominant Serb ministers warned against too far-reaching territorial claims, the memorandum on the issue was submitted to the allies only in July 1943, but by then it

7 Detlef Brandes, Holm Sundhaussen, Stefan Troebst, eds., *Lexikon der Vertreibungen. Deportation, Zwangsaussiedlung und ethnische Säuberung im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Wien – Köln – Weimar: Böhlau, 2010).

was not taken into consideration because of the declining influence of the government-in-exile relative to the successes of the Partisans.

BRITAIN AND THE CONFEDERATION PLANS

British endeavours to induce the Yugoslav government to commit to the federalization of Yugoslavia after the war failed due to the stubborn opposition of the Serb ministers, which was strengthened by concern over the massacres in "Greater Croatia." At the beginning of the war, the Chamberlain government doubted whether Czechoslovakia should be restored, and accepted the French proposal to recognize a "National Committee" instead of a government-in-exile. *Vis-à-vis* Churchill's government, Beneš reached further stages of recognition without any concessions to the Slovaks. The Foreign Office did not support those Slovak politicians who called for the post-war federalization of Czechoslovakia, especially since Slovak troops fought on the Axis side against the Red Army.

The British government, diplomats and political advisers had come to the conclusion that developments in Eastern Europe during the inter-war period had proved that the states of East-Central and South-East Europe should join together in two confederations in order to form a barrier against renewed German and possible Soviet aggression. This proposal was supported by the Poles without reservations, while the Yugoslav Foreign Minister, Momčilo Ninčić, used the plan as an instrument in the inner-Yugoslav power struggle. The Czechoslovak government made its consent conditional on good Polish-Soviet relations. The Greek government, for its part, was only prepared to form a loose union with Yugoslavia. When the Soviet minister made clear to the governments-in-exile that Moscow rejected any confederation plans, Beneš and Ninčić made up their minds to travel to the Soviet Union. They wanted to dispel Soviet misgivings and to conclude treaties of friendship and mutual cooperation with Moscow in the hope of averting future Soviet interference in the internal affairs of their countries. The Foreign Office succeeded in dissuading Ninčić permanently and Beneš for the time being from their intentions. When the Soviets also turned down Beneš's proposal to conclude at least parallel treaties of assistance with Poland and the Soviet Union, Beneš confined himself to a plan to reach agreement on a 20-year treaty of friendship, collaboration, and mutual assistance with the Soviet Union which would be open to the future accession of Poland. The Polish counter-proposal of a quadrilateral pact which would include Poland and Great Britain was abandoned by the British Foreign Secretary at the conference of Foreign Ministers of three Great Powers in Moscow in October 1943. Nevertheless, it opposed Beneš's plan, which allegedly would have led to the creation of

spheres of influence in Europe and to the isolation of Poland. In October 1943 Eden gave up his opposition to Beneš's projected trip to Moscow to conclude the treaty. After the conference at Teheran, it became more and more clear that British plans for the future of East-Central and South-East Europe could not be realized in the face of Soviet resistance and without strong American support. As a result, during the Warsaw as well as the Slovak uprising, Britain provided little help, since both states were *de facto* already situated in the Soviet sphere of influence.

BELGIUM IN EXILE: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

CHANTAL KESTELOOT

During the Second World War, Great Britain welcomed several governments-in-exile and numerous refugees.[1] Even though it was not the only country to act as a host, it was probably the most emblematic. As for Belgian civilians, it was their second flight to Britain as had been the case in 1914–1918. This time, however, the government also crossed the Channel in search of a safe haven. The following text describes the situation of both the refugees and their exiled leadership.

A FIRST EXPERIENCE: THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The German invasion of 1940 was not Belgium's first war, nor its first experience of exile. Indeed, German forces had also crossed the Belgian border in August 1914. This violent attack caused widespread destruction and fear, forcing more than one million people to flee: "Upwards of 400,000 refugees fled from Belgium to the Netherlands in the first three months following the outbreak of war. This was only the beginning of an enormous upheaval. An estimated 200,000 Belgian refugees arrived in France in the aftermath of the German invasion. Around 160,000 refugees remained on British registers at the end of 1916, this number dropping only slightly before the war ended."[2] Half of the August 1914 refugees had returned home by the end of the month or early September. More than half a million Belgians, i.e., 10 percent of the total population, nonetheless, spent the war years abroad, having no possibility of repatriation before the 1918 armistice. This event left deep wounds in the psyche of the nation and also involved having to come to terms with other cultures, customs, languages and religions. Britain had been rather welcoming towards the Belgian refugees, since Belgium had acquired an aura of heroism ("Brave Little Belgium") and was seen as the victim of unjust

1 For a global overview, see Martin Conway, José Gotovitch, eds., *Europe in Exile. European Exile Communities in Britain 1940–1945* (New York – Oxford: Berghahn Books/Soma-Ceges, 2001).

2 Peter Gatrell, "Refugees," in Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, eds., *1914–1918 online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War* (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2014). Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10134.

treatment since its neutrality had been violated and because the Germans had massacred civilians during their invasion ("Poor Little Belgium").

This attitude of friendliness slowly evolved, modified during the war. In 1914, the refugees were clearly "at the heart of the discourse which opposed barbarians to civilized peoples"[3] and served as a strong incentive for mobilization. As time passed, a change became visible in the structures for aid distribution. These were private at first, but, as the initial enthusiasm waned, were gradually replaced by government programmes. The situation was comparable in the Netherlands and in France.[4] One of the interesting characteristics of private and public relief policies is the correlation between humanitarian relief and social stratification. During the summer and early fall of 1914, numerous local relief committees were founded to help the refugees. However, the estimated 2,500 active associations in Britain at the early stages of the war decreased in number as the conflict persisted. The ways in which relief was administered largely reflected 19th century social divisions, both regarding the refugees and the host countries. In other words, help for refugees from the upper and middle classes was not the same as that for the lower classes.

As the war continued, the necessity to find suitable occupations for the refugees became prominent. In the summer of 1914, no one expected a long war. At the time, Britain was grappling with a high unemployment rate and it was out of the question that refugees would compete with British workers on the job market. This situation improved steadily, first with an upturn in economic conditions that required additional labour, and then with the implementation of the Military Service Act, which came into effect in March 1916, and made single British men aged between 18 and 41 liable for military service. Two months later, in May, this was extended to include married men. By mid–1916, around 50,000 Belgian refugees were working in Britain. Integration, however, was not easy since labour cultures were totally different. Before long, the presence of Belgian refugees was believed to pose a threat to the British social protection system. The exiles, meanwhile, had become more organized; in certain cities they even occupied entire neighbourhoods, and had their own businesses. Sharing native space with non-natives in the long term, however, revealed strong dissimilarities which increasingly turned the stay of the refugees into a burden. This first experience is paramount to an understanding of how British society reacted to Belgian exiles when the Second World War broke out.

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3 José Gotovitch, "Réfugiés et solidarité – Vluchtelingen en solidariteit," in Serge Jaumain, Michaël Amara, Benoît Majerus, and Antoon Vrints, eds., *Une guerre totale? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre mondiale. Nouvelles tendances de la recherche historique* (Bruxelles: AGR, 2005), p. 407.

4 For a general overview of this question, see Michaël Amara's study *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'exil: les réfugiés de la Première Guerre mondiale. France, Grande-Bretagne, Pays-Bas* (Bruxelles: Editions de l'ULB, 2008).

THE OUTBREAK OF THE WAR ON THE WESTERN FRONT

The second German invasion took place on 10 May 1940 and was followed by the Belgian capitulation 18 days later. The King, like his father, decided to remain in Belgium, but the country's submission had created an entirely different context. During the First World War, King Albert remained head of the army, and Belgium was at war with Germany during the four years of hostilities. The Belgian government remained in exile in Le Havre in France for the duration of the conflict. The memories of the massacres of 1914 were very much alive in May 1940 and the Belgian population fled in huge numbers from the second German attack. From one-and-a-half to two million people sought refuge in France, most of whom went back home between July and September, while the rest remained, either willingly or because of the impossibility of returning to Belgium. Again, some refugees crossed the Channel: in the summer of 1940, around 15,000 Belgians arrived in Britain, a small figure compared to the 250,000 who came in 1914.

Besides Britain, the United States, mainly New York City, was chosen as a destination (especially by industrial and financial groups but also by members of the Belgian government-in-exile and by Jewish families). On top of that, around 1,000 Belgian Jews escaped to Portugal.

While the number of Belgians who sought sanctuary in Britain was much smaller than during the First World War, they were nevertheless the largest refugee community in the United Kingdom. According to figures from the Home Office, Britain hosted 22,758 refugees in October 1940. Of these, 14,500 were Belgian, 3,164 Polish, 2,250 French and 1,657 Dutch. Of course, the quantity of wartime refugees must be compared to the 250,000 who had arrived before.[5]

Having learnt from her previous experience, Britain was better prepared for the influx of refugees. This time different scenarios had been anticipated, the authorities having estimated that up to 500,000 refugees from Belgium and the Netherlands would arrive. This figure was later scaled down to 100,000, but, naturally enough, the social and financial consequences of the sudden appearance of such a number on British soil was feared. With the surrender of the Dutch army five days after the German invasion, the estimates turned out to have been largely exaggerated.

For those who made the journey across the Channel, the British government had no alternative but to provide welcome, while at the same time dreading the prospect of large-scale migration, especially of needy refugees. As had happened during the First World War, a certain amount of class

5 Colin Holmes, "British Government Policy Towards Wartime Refugees," in Conway, Gotovitch, eds., *Europe in Exile*, p. 14.

solidarity again came into play, with the poor being confronted with more obstacles than the wealthy, who were often hosted by their British counterparts. In order to relieve the pressure on the British Treasury, the business of meeting and helping the new arrivals to adjust to their new life was once more handed over to local voluntary organizations.

Of the approximately 15,000 Belgian civilians who arrived in Britain, most had been deprived of everything, having either been unable to take their belongings with them or having lost what they had on the way.[6] The majority stayed in London, at the so-called reception centres. The group was far from homogenous. The vast majority (63 percent) were Flemish women, children and older men, and two main social groups emerged: civil servants (3,000) and fishing communities. Among the first to come was the Belgian merchant marine. On 17 May 1940, the entire Belgian fishing fleet (507 vessels) had been requisitioned by the Belgian government and ordered to evacuate the coast. The old fleet had been seized and destroyed by the Germans in 1914, but by 1940 a new one had come into being, up to date, well equipped and motorized. Fifty percent of the ships arrived at British shores, from which one half were assigned to the fishing trade, and the remainder taken into service by the Royal Navy.

Another feature that distinguished WW2 refugees from those of the previous conflict was that the later arrivals benefited more from structures established by the Belgian authorities themselves. Both the parliamentary office (created in July 1940) and the Embassy helped smooth some of the bureaucratic hurdles faced by the newcomers. There was, nevertheless, a large degree of amateurism and chaos in running the operation.

Once more, the issue of refugee employment had to be considered. However, on this occasion the expectation was that the conflict could last for years, so the problem was tackled immediately. Unfortunately, as in 1914, Britain had a high unemployment rate and was again in the middle of a financial crisis, and, not surprisingly, the British authorities preferred to give work to their own citizens than to foreigners. On the other hand, in 1940, the Belgian authorities themselves decided to create positions for the refugees. The task was not an easy one, particularly so because London was often bombarded. Providing accommodation posed additional problems as there were very few places of refuge left. Since most of the refugees were women and children, it was decided to move them away from the capital. After the autumn of 1940, because of the Blitz, only one third of the Belgian refugees remained in London, the rest having been transferred to other districts in Britain. The question of work in the new, safer havens had now to be resolved.

6 See Luis Angel Bernardo and Matthew Buck, "Belgian Society in Exile: An Attempt at a Synthesis," in Conway, Gotovitch, eds., *Europe in Exile*, pp. 53–66.

This matter had progressively become a priority for the British authorities, too. A scheme was launched to make jobs available for the refugees but this of course was partially hindered by the language barrier. However, general mobilization came into effect in April 1941, and, by May 1943, 80 percent of the men and 40 percent of the women were employed. Clearly, the more successful handling of the problem this time around was also the result of the Belgian government's presence. The question of work was high on the agenda with the arrival in Britain of the chief Belgian ministers in late October 1940. The *Service Central des Réfugiés*, which came into being on 21 September 1940, slowly included within its remit the provision of health, education and jobs for Belgian nationals. By degrees, associations giving moral and spiritual support were also initiated. The exiled community was becoming increasingly organized, with access to schools, libraries, English courses, and sporting activities, as well as social gatherings such as the celebration of Belgian National Day, placed on a much firmer footing. Needless to say, the upturn in refugee life was reflected most among those who stayed in London or in areas where there were sufficient numbers to create a sense of togetherness.

EXILED GOVERNMENTS AND POLICY-MAKERS

Among those who left Belgium for Britain in the early summer of 1940 were anti-Fascists who had opposed Belgian neutrality, Socialist Party members, and officials of the Socialist Trade Union, who had links with British unions in the framework of the international trade union movement.[7] Included in these groups were Camille Huysmans, who had protected Jewish and German anti-Fascist refugees during the 1930s, Isabelle Blume, who had been active during the Spanish Civil War, and Max Buset, future head of the Socialist Party after the liberation of Belgium. These members of left-wing circles organized rapidly and were fully committed to backing the British war effort. The "*Office des Parlementaires belges*" was founded on 22 July 1940, essentially formed by socialist and progressivist liberals. Exile had acquired a quality of political activism. At the same time, most members of the Belgian government were scattered throughout in France, under two minds about whether to return to their occupied country or throw in their lot with the British. The German Führer, however, soon prohibited the first option by a decree issued on 18 July 1940. Undoubtedly, the situation was very different from what had prevailed in 1914–1918.

7 About this group, see José Gotovitch, *De Belgische socialisten in Londen* (Antwerpen: Standaard, 1981).

Marcel-Henri Jaspar, the Belgian Minister of Health, was the only minister who travelled to London in June 1940. He joined Camille Huysmans in creating a "shadow government." The British, however, were reluctant to recognize the Jaspar-Huysmans arrangement. In this context, the arrival in Otober 1940 of de Vleeschauwer, the one Belgian minister with legal powers outside Belgium itself, was a turning point. As Belgian Minister of the Colonies, de Vleeschauwer could have brought the Congo over to the British side, but he hesitated to do so. Moreover, he had been asked by Prime Minister Hubert Pierlot to join the other Belgian MPs in Vichy. De Vleeschauwer was close to the King and not very enthusiastic about abandoning what he considered the realm of legality to take part in a "governmental adventure" with left-wing politicians. On 15 August 1940, the Belgian MPs in London openly pledged their solidarity with the British by means of a manifesto. The text mentioned the strategic importance of the Congo, which the authors clearly wished would benefit the Allies, and objected to a separate peace. This stance was unambiguously perceived as a criticism of the royal capitulation of 28 May. Being the only Belgian minister with legal powers outside of Belgium, de Vleeschauwer, together with Camille Gutt who came to London soon afterwards on his own initiative, was able to form a temporary "government of two" with British approval. However, both Gutt[8] and de Vleeschauwer were concerned with the legitimacy of their actions and preferred to await the arrival of the other ministers, namely Paul-Henri Spaak and Pierlot,[9] who had been detained in Spain *en route* from France to London. Pierlot and Spaak reached London on 22 October 1940, thereby marking the start of the "government of four," and providing this "official" government with the authority of Belgium's last elected Prime Minister. Their work was at first centred on the four key ministries of the war period: Colonies, Finances, Defence, and Foreign Affairs. The British had been distrustful of many of the Belgian ministers, as well as of the legitimacy of the governement itself. However, with the advent of the Prime Minister, the new state of affairs, albeit grudgingly, was accepted.

The priority of the Belgian government was to appear convincing and to gain credibility after the events of the summer. They had a number of strategic assets to offer but needed political standing. The fact that King Leopold III had remained in Belgium further complicated the situation. Other countries had sent both their governments and their heads of state to London. It was

8 See Jean-François Crombois, *Camille Gutt, 1940–1945, les finances et la guerre* (Bruxelles-Gerpinnes: Quorum-Ceges, 2000).

9 See Pierre Van den Dungen, *Hubert Pierlot 1883–1963. La Loi, le Roi, la Liberté* (Bruxelles: Le Cri, 2010); Michel Dumoulin, *Spaak* (Bruxelles: Racine, 1999).

also important to win popularity in occupied Belgium, where the presence of the King was, at least for the moment, considered reassuring.

The difficulties facing the Belgian government-in-exile were therefore fourfold: to satisfy the British authorities, and more broadly the Allies, as to its legitimacy and determination, to win over the Belgian people, to maintain cohesion and dynamism in the ministerial group, and to assure the Belgian exiles of its concern regarding their fate and well-being.

Time was favourable with regard to furthering acceptance and legitimacy in Belgium,[10] but the whole business was exhausting. The ministers were only four in total and each had a considerable workload. Indeed, the number of tasks to be performed soon became impracticable and in early 1942 they decided to hire sub-secretaries of state, a post which had not formerly existed in the Belgian legislature. Most of the other ministers had remained in France but were expected to join their colleagues in London and take up office. By early 1941, however, it became clear that this was no longer an option from a political point of view. The situation was of course exceptional, but in practice they ceased to serve as ministers. Their portfolios were therefore shared among the four already in London and later also by the sub-secretaries. Meanwhile, another minister who had remained in occupied Belgium reached London and became Minister of Propaganda and Justice. Other nominations were also made and by the spring of 1943 the government would count 12 members in all.

RELATIONS WITH OCCUPIED BELGIUM AND THE (HOMELAND) RESISTANCE

During the first months of the war, communication between London and occupied Belgium was scant. The government-in-exile was frowned upon at first but this view modified as the war progressed. In the autumn months of 1940, Britain's bold stand against Hitler was admired by many Belgians.[11] Yet, by and large, information was limited to what was transmitted by radio. Indeed, in early September 1940, the BBC had begun to broadcast 15–minute news bulletins to Belgium twice daily, but, from July 1940, listening to

10 "Le gouvernement a continué à regagner petit à petit dans l'opinion le terrain qu'il avait perdu lors des événements de fin mai 1940. Il ne reste aujourd'hui plus grand-chose de l'extrême discrédit dans lequel il était tombé. Il n'est pas rare d'entendre faire son éloge par ceux-là même qui, il y a deux ans, le condamnaient avec une implacable sévérité et envisageaient de le faire traduire devant une Haute Cour." This opinion was expressed after two and a half years of occupation. Paul Struye, Guillaume Jacquemyns, *La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande (1940–1944)* (Bruxelles: Complexe/Ceges, 2002), pp. 176–177.

11 Voir Alain Colignon, "La Résistance 'de droite': une anglophilie par défaut?," in *Jours de guerre,* pp. 37–53.

these programmes was strictly forbidden.[12] The aim of the BBC reports was to counteract German propaganda strategies and to make the government-in-exile's decisions known to those at home, although the Belgians in London were not always satisfied with the tone and the news items selected. Clearly, the government wished to have the media under its own control. With the establishment of *Radio nationale belge* in October 1942, however, the Belgians had access to the air waves themselves.

Research has shown that the importance of the Belgian broadcasts from London was more imaginary than real. The number of listeners actually decreased during the war (40 percent initially but less than 25 percent by liberation) as German jamming became more effective from the end of 1942. In addition, *Radio-Bruxelles,* which the occupiers controlled, featured popular entertainment programmes and those Belgians who tuned in to "London" also liked to pick up other stations. Nevertheless, the London broadcasts did play an important role in conveying messages to the resistance movements, notifying interested parties of safe arrivals in London, and in disseminating government directives.

Radio was not the only means used by the government-in-exile to maintain relations with their compatriots in occupied territories. The Belgian ministers in London were also very much aware of the stringent rationing system enforced in the homeland, although with the threat of immediate confiscation by the German authorities, there was little that could be effectively done in terms of sending food supplies to alleviate the situation. However, the commitment was real and they did provide what help they could with the aid of private organizations.

The imposition of forced labour in Belgium in 1942 marked a turning point. The so-called "*Mission Socrate*" was launched to financially help those who tried to escape the measure.[13] The mission took time to get underway. The aim was to keep as many workers as possible out of German reach, but the fugitives still had to survive in occupied Belgium, where getting enough to live on was becoming a severe problem. It was equally imperative that those who refused the work mobilization should not be driven to commit violent acts to find food. The Socrates operation was organized with the help of traditional structures, particularly Catholic and socialist networks.

Relief for citizens who rejected the forced labour recruitment was linked to the question of financing the resistance. The government-in-exile had to decide which groups it should help. The issue of whether the *Front de l'Indépendance*

12 See Céline Rase, *Radio Bruxelles au pilori. Des ondes impures à l'épuration des ondes. Contribution à l'histoire de la radio, des collaborations et des répressions en Belgique (1939–1950),* Thèse de doctorat inédite (Namur: Université de Namur, 2015–2016).

13 See Bernard Ducarme, "Le financement de la résistance armée en Belgique, 1940–1944," in *Courrier hebdomadaire du Crisp*, No. 476–477 (1970).

movement, which had communist tendencies but nevertheless recognized the government's legality, should be included was debated at length. A major concern for the Belgian politicians in London and for their State Security and Intelligence was the line these parties would take at the moment of liberation.[14] How would they guarantee the keeping of law and order? What part would the resistance, itself divided into markedly different currents, have in the political life of the restored state? The government's stance was that no resistance movement should be in charge of maintaining order. This was brought home in January 1944, when a clear message was sent through parachuted agents that the upholding of law and order would not be the responsibility of the resistance organizations, but that the authorities could, if necessary, request their assistance. This decision was accepted by all factions.

From December 1943, 15 million Belgian francs were sent to Belgium every month. The major portion of this was used to assist those on the run from work conscription (10 million), and the rest went to the various resistance movements. This help made clear the government-in-exile's commitment to supporting the homeland resistance.

PREPARING FOR THE POST-WAR REALITY

One of the main wartime concerns shared by both the Belgians at home and the government-in-exile in London was preparation for the post-war period. For this purpose, the gathering of reliable information was crucial. What were the main items of importance for citizens? How did Belgians at home feel about the government-in-exile? What were their priorities for the aftermath of the war? The answers proposed fuelled exchanges and discussions. The exiles kept track of developments from a distance and employed a certain amount of ideological filtering to gauge public opinion. At the same time, the circulation of information on decisions taken in London was felt to be paramount. The chief mediators in this regard were based in Brussels, mostly prewar associates of the Prime Minister from the francophone Catholic milieu with whom he had preserved strong ties.

As the war continued, the government's preoccupation centred more and more on the situation that would come into being at the end of hostilities. The Commission for the Study of Post-war Problems (CEPAG) was founded in June 1941.[15] Three main tasks were identified: the immediate measures to

14 See Etienne Verhoeyen, "La résistance belge vue de Londres: ententes et divergences entre Belges et Britanniques: le cas du SOE," in *La résistance et les Européens du Nord/Het Verzet en Noord-Europa* (Bruxelles-Paris: IHTP/CREHSGM, 1994), Vol. 2, pp. 156–182.

15 See Diane de Bellefroid, "The Commission pour l'Etude des Problèmes d'Après-Guerre (CEPAG) 1941–1944," in Conway, Gotovitch, eds., *Europe in Exile* (2001), pp. 121–134.

be put into practice after the country's liberation, the political, social and economic reforms to be undertaken, and the maintenance of a smooth relationship with the British government and the Allies to help solve post-war problems. A lot of thought went into social improvement. Clearly, the aim was to find a remedy for the profound pre-war crisis in Belgian democracy which had stretched well into the year 1940. Several of the initiatives proposed are worth mentioning, particularly the outspoken desire to increase the role of the state in political, social and economic matters. On the domestic front, the goal was to achieve a more democratic and egalitarian society, while internationally a new world order was envisaged, with mutual respect among nations. After the war, several of these projects were implemented, most notably currency reform, the introduction of a social security system, and the creation of a State Council.

The issue of retribution for collaboration, in other words the "punishment of the traitors," was also an important concern. The government took decisive steps in December 1942 to broaden the legal provisions enacted after the First World War in this regard. In May 1944, jurisdiction for the dispensing of justice in this area was handed over to the military courts. This move was linked to information coming from occupied Belgium in connection with the conduct of the enemy and to the scale of the collaboration.

WHAT ABOUT THE BELGIAN ARMY?

Among those who went into exile in May and June 1940 were several hundred from the ranks of the Belgian army.[16] This was a much smaller number than, for example, their Polish counterparts and, unlike the Poles and the Czechoslovaks, they would not have any role to play in the Battle of Britain. The Belgian soldiers gathered in Tenby, in South Wales. Of the first group of around 600 men, some returned to France on 3 June 1940 since Belgium had not as yet surrendered. The remainder stayed put but had difficult times to endure after French capitulation on 18 June 1940. Many soldiers were hostile to the Belgian government which was still in France. Others had been taken aback by the King's actions, and to exacerbate matters even more, they had no meaningful dialogue with either government exiles in London or the British, who were preoccupied with their own forces. On 12 August 1940, however, a general staff and a fighting unit were created. These had at first a rather symbolic role but their status rapidly increased. Tensions, however, did not abate. Nor were they resolved by the formation of the Belgian government-

16 See Luc De Vos, "The Reconstruction of Belgian Military Forces in Britain," in Conway, Gotovitch, eds., *Europe in Exile* (2001), pp. 81–98.

in-exile. Resentment was real and officers were divided into two camps, one of which might be termed "democratic," the other "royalist" or even fascist. The state of general dissatisfaction was augmented even more by the lack of opportunity to fight the enemy, shortcomings in equipment, and relations with the policy makers in London.

In June 1942, the so-called "*Forces Belges de la Grande Bretagne*" joined the Allied war effort. At their head was Major Jean-Baptiste Piron, who had escaped from Belgium and arrived in Britain through Scotland in 1942. The brigade, which would bear his name, counted 5,000 men when Piron took charge. Some had participated in the earlier Abyssinian campaign. From 30 July 1944 Belgian troops began to arrive in Normandy and on 3 September the brigade crossed the French border and joined in the liberation of Brussels just one day later.

RETURN AND SILENCE

For the Belgians, the heroes of the Second World War were the soldiers (the first Belgian Brigade, the Brigade Piron), in contrast to the government-in-exile in London who came home on 8 September to meet with general indifference. Other displaced nationals only returned in the course of the summer and autumn of 1945. The exile experience did not have a long-lasting effect on Belgium in general. Indeed, in a broad sense, the event was muted. This is understandable for several reasons. Compared with the First World War, the Belgian presence in Britain was much smaller. In addition, when weighed against the depredations occupied Belgium and the conscripted labour force had to endure, along with the urgency of coming to grips with post-war problems, the London interlude seemed marginal enough. Another factor here was probably the royal question: the rupture between the King and his ministers had already taken place at the moment of Belgian capitulation, but the London sojourn contributed nothing to an improvement in the situation. All attempts by the government-in-exile to re-establish relations with the King failed. After the war, Socialists and Catholics took opposing positions on the royal question and mention of the London years would likely have been an unwelcome reminder to both of what might best be quietly left to one side. The policy-makers' experience with exile had been, on the whole, one of powerlessness and of dependence on their British hosts and, despite all the projects and plans devised in London, Belgium not Britain was where the great reforms would be decided upon.

On the other hand, the Piron brigade returned victoriously to become the real heroes in the liberation of Brussels. Although this remained a far cry from triumphant Gaullism, the role of the Belgian soldier in driving the

enemy from the nation's capital nevertheless entered the country's annals of glory.

It was not until the 1970s, when a number of eyewitnesses started to share their memories, that the archives were opened and research into this episode of Belgian history could begin. Today, the exile and the part played by the Belgian government in London are acknowledged. What appears surprising, however, is the relative shortfall in the influence accorded them. Moreover, there seems to be no collective memory as such, only a number of individual figures each with his own individual story to tell. In this sense, the national experience of WW2 exile in Britain is not unlike that of the First World War, which likewise left few traces. On the other hand, the brunt of the earlier exile had been borne by civilians not policy makers or members of the armed forces. Indeed, for Belgians looking back on the First World War today the tendency is to focus increasingly on the plight of refugees, not surprisingly perhaps given the topicality of the issue. The British exile of 1940–1945, in contrast, has been largely forgotten.