

## Belgium's Finest Hour?

### King Albert and Queen Elisabeth in Wartime

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[ LUC VANDEWEYER ]

The second King of Belgium, Leopold II, was not popular either in Belgium or abroad. Furthermore, he had no son to succeed him. It was his nephew, Albert, born on 18 April 1875, who had to prepare for that role. The young man received a military education, which deeply influenced his beliefs and ideas. Then, on 2 October 1900, the Prince married Elisabeth of Bavaria, a lady of high nobility. In fact the Belgian royal family had been intermarrying with various European royal families for generations. Finally, in 1909, Albert became head of state of an unusual country with many limitations, of which he was very well aware.

### A neutral state

Belgium was a young state. It had broken away from the Netherlands in 1830 after an armed uprising. In return for support from the European great powers for its independence, the country had to undertake to maintain an armed neutrality. It had to defend its borders against all invaders but could also rely on the military support of the great powers who had agreed to guarantee its independence. All the European great powers had set their signatures to this.

So, the country had to defend itself - but it was small. Obviously it would not be able to raise an army capable of resisting one of the great powers. The Belgian strategy was therefore directed at preserving the core elements of the state, including its army, within a large stronghold built around the seaport of Antwerp. Outside it, mobile troops were available to discourage any invasion by a foreign army and if necessary to obstruct it as much as possible. It was hoped that discouragement would be enough to protect at least the more populous regions to the north of the Sambre and Meuse valleys against foreign troops passing through.

There was, after all, a threat of war in Europe because of the sharp conflict of interests between the great powers. For Belgium, the antagonism between France and Germany was the most dangerous. The situation became more acute after 1900 and led to the formation of two hostile coalitions with Russia, France and Great Britain on one side and Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire on the other. In particular, the fact that the British abandoned their 'splendid isolation' after 1904 and ultimately signed an agreement with France

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**LES SOUVERAINS BÉNIS**  
Le roi des Belges apportant dans ses bras un blessé à l'hôpital  
où la reine Elisabeth soigne les soldats.

In this French weekly you can see King Albert carrying a wounded soldier into the hospital. Queen Elisabeth is watching

caused alarm bells to ring in Brussels. There was no great power left which, from a neutral standpoint, might dissuade the hostile coalitions from resorting to arms or, if this failed, could limit conflicts geographically with its powerful fleet.

Throughout his formative years as a young officer, Albert's mind was filled with the strategic problems facing his country. He was also particularly interested in all forms of technology. The army was just the place for him because there were many younger officers who were equally fascinated by the new possibilities which machines, motor vehicles, armour plating, artillery and such like could offer the armed forces of a small country with a large and efficient heavy industry. The budget, however, was limited. Only in the autumn of 1909 was national service made more or less universal. For the first time in many years it was possible to fundamentally strengthen the army. But it would need time.

The royal couple presented a totally different image from Leopold II and they soon became hugely popular. Their popularity grew even more after Albert became king. He made a point of wearing military uniform at official functions in order to emphasise the fact that constitutionally he was the supreme commander of the army.

Meanwhile there were rumblings in the Balkans and the sabre-rattling raised tensions throughout Europe. Germany drastically strengthened its army by the law of 3 July 1913. It was followed by France on 7 August, and Russia and Austria-Hungary also followed suit. The arms race led to an unprecedented



King Albert inspecting an aircraft on the beach of De Panne. © Archives Royal Palace Brussels

militarisation of Europe. Berlin had already made it known that it felt so threatened that - if it was necessary in order to defeat France - it would not respect the neutrality of Belgian territory. King Albert was informed of this personally and found it seriously worrying.

On 28 June 1914 the heir to the Austrian throne and his wife were assassinated in Sarajevo by a Serbian nationalist. The police investigation uncovered links to the Serbian capital of Belgrade. Vienna threatened war. Would this unleash a disastrous chain reaction? Albert feared that it would.

Belgium was obliged to defend the neutrality of its territory with force of arms. To avoid any misunderstandings on this score, the country announced on 29 July that its army had been put on an 'armed peace footing'. The barracks were filled with the four most recent militia intakes. The decision was intended to show that Brussels was serious.

## The German invasion

King Albert had known for years that Berlin had plans ready for marching through Belgian territory. If this should happen, British and French forces would support Belgium. But could London and Paris deploy sufficient forces to prevent the Germans from overrunning the country? It seemed extremely unlikely. Belgium therefore banked on the stronghold of Antwerp. It was believed that it was strong enough to withstand a lengthy siege and that the political core of the state, including the royal family, would be secure within it. The country would then still count for something after the conflict.

On 2 August, Berlin sent Brussels an ultimatum. Germany demanded free passage for its troops through to France. The Belgian government, under Albert's leadership, refused. It had no choice. Immediately after that, the King announced that he was taking over the effective leadership of the army. He then left for the military headquarters which he had set up in the town hall of the city of Leuven. In fact, most of the mobile field units were concentrated well inside

Belgium, in east Brabant. The army leadership did not want to place too many of its troops close to the border where they ran the risk of being immediately annihilated by a surprise attack.

The King and his ministers were therefore geographically separated. But King and Ministers needed each other's signature for decisions to be lawful. Of course, the distance between Brussels and Leuven was not great and communications were good.

On 4 August, German armed forces invaded Belgium *en masse*. On 18 August, Albert was compelled to order his army to retreat rapidly to Antwerp where the government had already moved. From there, on two occasions, he would send massive numbers of troops to attack the relatively weak German north flank which proved to be vulnerable, compelling the German command to draw on troops from the main force. In that way the Belgian army helped to save the French and British forces. Meanwhile, with the Royal Navy under the command of Winston Churchill, London sent reinforcements to Antwerp in the form of Royal Marines.

This freedom of movement did not last long. At the end of September, the German High Command was determined to wipe out fortress Antwerp. The pressure on its forts was greatly increased. This gave rise to a problem which nobody had foreseen in the pre-war planning, namely the fall of Antwerp. Withdrawal or surrender were now the only alternatives left to King Albert.

Where could the King, the government and the field army go? The only way out was towards the sea and the only real chance of survival was to link up with the British and French armies. On 8 October the exodus began, but with the German army hot on their heels, the retreat turned towards the French border in the hope of finding some sorely-needed military support.

The Belgian government and the army command ended up in the little frontier town of Veurne. Watching them streaming in stood a disconcerted Jozef Gesquière. He noted on 14 October: "It is said that the King and Queen are in the area and intend to stay here, probably in De Panne." The rumours were right. On the following day, Gesquière heard that the headquarters had been installed in the town hall, where the large upper chamber was converted into an office for the royal supreme commander. That morning he saw the King himself step out of a car. "On his flushed face, one could see that he was worried", he noted. His arrival was almost furtive: "No cheering crowds. Hardly anybody noticed the King's arrival. Everything happened so secretly and so quickly."

## **The King's absolute power**

From Veurne, the army command could direct the army, which had set itself up along the River Yser in order to hold back the advancing enemy. But what about the ministers? The Chief Minister, Charles de Broqueville, tried to remain in Veurne while the other ministers travelled on into France. But the King made it quite clear to him that there was little he could do and that it would be better if he too left for France. Their relationship had become fairly icy. There was now not only a physical but also a mental separation between King and government.

After the Battle of the Yser at the end of October 1914 the presence of the royal supreme commander at headquarters was less necessary. He now



Queen Elisabeth taking pictures. De Panne, 1915.  
© In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper

resided virtually permanently at De Panne. At the westerly edge of De Panne there were four villas, set somewhat apart from the rest of the village. Queen Elisabeth, the three children and a small entourage of staff and military advisers also stayed there, relatively undisturbed, until 1917.

De Panne was suitable, the King decided. One reason was that new headquarters were set up in the border village of Houtem. It was also in Houtem that the King and his ministers held their meetings in the early phases of the war. Otherwise, the ministers concentrated their rather meagre administrative staff in a suburb of the French seaport of Le Havre. So the distances involved were considerable, which made the ministers uneasy. They realised that Belgium had to have unity of leadership but this could not be guaranteed so long as the King insisted on remaining on Belgian soil within range of the heavy German artillery. Supreme authority over Free Belgium was therefore geographically scattered even if in the eyes of citizens and soldiers this was not the case. After all, was not De Panne now the capital? The royal couple had become the pre-eminent symbol of the Belgian nation. Furthermore, their entourage did everything it could to build up this image among the troops and the public. The idea was further boosted by high-ranking visits to De Panne with the associated parades and ceremonies.

The King and Queen did not shut themselves away. Albert often went out, as did the Queen. And this was not limited to beach walks on horseback or on foot. They showed themselves everywhere behind the Belgian lines and even in the trenches on the front. Virtually every soldier got to see the royals at close quarters. Queen Elisabeth was often observed in the field hospitals. However, she did not do any actual nursing, although the propaganda suggested that she did. It goes without saying that this proximity did much to boost the morale of the troops.

## **His view of the war**

In 1917 an 'inner cabinet' was created. This small group of ministers met in De Panne whenever the king wanted to exercise his 'presidency' of the government. The allies quickly realised that there was only one government. If they wanted to discuss strategic decisions and input from the Belgian army, they had to do so with the King. He was the real leader of the Belgian forces, the man who had the final word. However, the King could never be persuaded to take part in allied offensives or allow his troops to play a major role outside Belgian territory. He wanted to be absolutely certain that an offensive would be successful. Until well into the summer of 1918 events proved him right. All the allied offensives bled to death.

King Albert put his stamp on the diplomacy because he was utterly convinced that it was the only way for Belgium to survive the conflict and thereby maintain its independence, its social model and its monarchy. Furthermore, the country remained obliged by treaty to be 'neutral'. Belgium may have fought on the same side at the front, but in his eyes it was never one of the 'allies' like the French and the British. That was his guideline. He had strong doubts whether the civilian politicians properly appreciated the all-consuming nature of the war. This belief in fact led him in 1916 to put out feelers in Berlin to see whether a compromise peace might be possible. He was ignored.

The King followed a highly personal course and kept the civil authorities very much at arm's length. He was, however, happy to allow his ministers free rein to look after the numerous Belgian refugees in Le Havre.

As well as that, an impressive network of Belgian training camps, factories, hospitals and nursing homes was built up on French soil. The Belgian army was, after all, seriously handicapped because virtually the entire country was occupied by the Germans. It had therefore to be all the more creative in order to maintain itself in a war of attrition in which weaponry and tactics were evolving rapidly. At the same time, it had to try to retain as much autonomy as possible from the French and British forces.

The King regarded that autonomy as very important. He was horrified by the terrible loss of human life suffered by the armies of the great powers. He was appalled by the slaughter of a generation of young men on the battlefield. He wanted to spare his own soldiers and their families such suffering and in his eyes he could only do that if he was in complete control. He considered most politicians to be irresponsible, certainly if they were the mouthpiece of movements in Belgian society which he mistrusted: the Catholics and Socialists, for example, parties with an anti-militarist tradition. They were responsible for the weakness of his army, or so he believed. But he also mistrusted the party supporters in France.



Queen Elisabeth and Doctor Lepage visiting wounded soldiers at L'Océan, Vinkem. Photo © Archives Red Cross Flanders. Mechelen. Painting by Alfred Bastien





Queen Elisabeth assisting Doctor Lepage at L'Océan, De Panne.  
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King Albert I and Maréchal Foch, De Panne © In Flanders  
Fields Museum, Ieper



Albert believed in a determinist concept of history which Charles Lagrange had taught at the Military School. He had developed the so-called laws of Nicolas Brück, a 19th century Belgian officer, in conjunction with a collection of Biblical arguments. Furthermore, changes in the Earth's magnetism and the chronology of the Old Testament also played an important role. These laws revealed that the French as a nation and civilisation had been in irreversible decline since 1870. The future lay with the Anglo-Saxons and would do so till the end of time, which would inevitably occur within a few hundred years. This partially explains Albert's actions as a military leader.

## After the war

The King was rightly concerned about Belgium's future. After all, the conflict had lasted far longer than anyone could have foreseen in August 1914. The warring states held each other in a stranglehold and they had gradually dragged each other down towards the abyss. The first great power to fall into it was Russia, in 1917. Albert saw very clearly that the war of attrition threatened to destroy the social order in all the warring states. But he also believed that societies where order and discipline were deeply rooted had a better chance of survival.

It was only as the autumn of 1918 approached that Albert agreed to join the offensive. The German army was by then seriously weakened. In the King's eyes, only now was success truly certain. The country was indeed liberated. But what then? Albert succeeded in mediating an important step towards democratisation which gave every adult man one vote. Women, however, were still excluded. The country also experienced coalition governments for the first time. Nobody could claim a political majority any more. The great political groupings now had to learn to collaborate, though the process went in fits and starts.

The King found it rather difficult because democratisation also threatened his own power. Albert particularly wanted to maintain close supervision of the armed forces and foreign policy. He was nervous of growing too close to France. But on the other hand, the British were trying to free themselves from close ties with the European continent. International relations remained bitter. The experience of war would not be digested or assimilated for at least a generation. The war veterans of 1914-18 would form the grassroots of numerous authoritarian movements which would lead, two decades later, to the Second World War.

But by that time, King Albert was no more. His love of risky physical challenges had long made ministers and generals nervous. During the war, it had taken him into the frontline trenches and led him to fly in the rickety aircraft of the time. In the end, it would take him to his death on the slippery chalk rocks of the Meuse valley near Marche-les-Dames. On 17 February 1934 he breathed his last. Belgium's Knight-King was dead. ■