



Belgian's Political Reconstruction after World War II

An Exemplary Case for the Normalisation of the Post-War
Western-European State?

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The Sorrows of Belgium provides a very rich and beautifully written account of Belgium's transition from a war-torn society at the beginning of 1944 to a stable, independent democracy by the end of 1947. However, in stressing the level of restoration of the Belgian state and society after the war, Martin Conway often approaches the period of reconstruction somewhat teleologically, and this perspective does little to further a better understanding of the mechanisms at play during periods of regime change such as the period studied. This is a bit of a missed opportunity, as is made clear by comparing *The Sorrows of Belgium* with the process of reconstruction in France and the Netherlands.

Politieke reconstructie van België na de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Een voorbeeld voor de normalisatie van de naoorlogse Westeuropese staat?

In *The Sorrows of Belgium* – een bijzonder mooi geschreven boek – onderzoekt Martin Conway het politieke en maatschappelijke herstelproces in België in de eerste jaren na de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Hij betoogt daarbij dat voor verandering nauwelijks ruimte was en dat de vooroorlogse samenleving nagenoeg geheel terugkeerde. De opzet van het werk is echter nogal teleologisch van aard, waardoor – belangrijke – delen van het verloop van het herstelproces zelf buiten beeld blijven. Dit is jammer omdat een korte vergelijking met de politieke reconstructie in Frankrijk en Nederland na de Tweede Wereldoorlog al gauw duidelijk maakt dat dit onderzoek een grote bijdrage zou kunnen leveren aan de studie van regimewisselingen in meer algemene zin.

Oxford historian Martin Conway is among the very few people outside Belgium who study Belgian history. With his latest publication, *The Sorrows of Belgium*¹, he provides a very rich and beautifully written account of Belgium's transition from a war-torn society governed by a German occupation regime at the beginning of 1944 to a stable, independent democracy by the end of 1947.

Central to the book is the question of how a newly liberated country, in which nearly all of the former state structures have been dismantled, restores legitimate state power. Starting with a thorough inventory of roughly seven contenders for power at the end of the war – namely, the German authorities, the collaborationist groups, the Resistance groups, the administrative and economic elite working and living in occupied Belgium, the Belgian government in exile, the King, and the Allied authorities – Conway immediately brings into focus the chaotic and highly unpredictable character of this kind of regime change. In contrast to politically stable times, periods of reconstruction are characterised by a lack of legitimate administrative rules, institutions, and procedures; political loyalties, alliances and relations of power remain unclear. The process of reconstruction can have diverse outcomes. In Belgium, just as elsewhere during the war, many people – including (former) politicians, civil servants, and bureaucratic intellectuals – expected a thorough constitutional change, which typically would involve a regionalisation of power. However, Conway emphasises that the reconstruction in Belgium resulted in a near-restoration of the pre-war state, with the addition of only isolated changes, such as the enfranchisement of women, the establishment of a structure of compulsory welfare support and the reinforcement of models of corporatist negotiation between employers and trade unions.

A remarkable level of restoration

Conway distinguishes roughly three major reasons for the remarkable level of restoration experienced in Belgium during the period studied. First, he sees it as the result of the personal choices of those trying to gain power. Restoring legitimate power at the highest level, that of the government, was far from a straightforward process. During the years Conway examines, 1944-1947, Belgium had no fewer than six consecutive governments, led first by the Catholic Hubert Pierlot (also Belgium's prime minister in exile during the war) and later by the socialists Achiel Van Acker (who led three governments), Camille Huysmans and Paul-Henri Spaak. Their position was never very solid,

1 Martin Conway, *The Sorrows of Belgium: Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944-1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, x + 415 pp., ISBN 978 0 19 969434 1).

and at no time were those in power inclined to embark on the uncertain path of political and administrative renewal. They had already faced challenges dealing with many pressing, more practical, problems, such as shortage of food and coal, social upheaval and strikes, shortage of labour in the mines, the widespread presence of weapons at all levels of society and the public demand for a drastic purge of former collaborationists from administration, police force and society at large. The support of the (armed) Allied authorities proved to be vital: although in hindsight it is clear that the (often Communist-minded) Resistance groups were never going to seize power in Belgium, several times the government felt threatened by their claims for power. Moreover, from Pierlot to Spaak, all governments were forced to confront King Leopold III, who caused major tension and division, both in politics and across the whole of Belgian society. Before the elections of March 1946 the King often challenged the government's legitimacy, and though at first Belgian politicians managed to work together in governments of national unity, the Royal Question would soon drive a wedge between the two largest political families, the Catholics and the socialists.

Second, Conway argues convincingly that the mould provided by the social and cultural frontiers of Belgian society greatly stimulated the process of normalisation. While the question of where legitimate power lay remained unanswered in Brussels, people throughout the country continued to live their lives. On a local level many found support in the reconstruction of the pre-war 'pillarized' society, even though the composition of society had changed, as well as the relations between the various social groups within society. Industrial workers for example, saw their position weakening, while the economic reconstruction after the war gave rise to a new middle class of small entrepreneurs, civil servants and administrative personnel. However, the reinstatement of many ('pillarized') organisations, such as youth groups, trade unions, and a whole variety of social and welfare organisations, continued to give shape to daily life.

Third, Conway shows how the process of restoration was stimulated by the upsurge of a genuine Belgian patriotism. Desiring to make a clear break with the war period and with the tainted image of Flemish nationalism that in so many cases had turned into collaborationism, people all over Belgium declared their loyalty to the Belgian state. Important in this regard is Conway's observation that this sentiment of Belgianness was generally translated into a celebration of the Belgian constitution; the idea of being a good patriot became linked to explicit support for the pre-war form of political institutions. As elsewhere, there was no shortage of plans for constitutional reforms that had been drawn up during the 1930s and during the war, but other than in countries such as France, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands, the primacy of the constitution prevented addressing them after the war. Even the Parliament – during the 1930s often despised for its perceived weakness – was hailed as an indispensable vehicle of Belgian democracy.

Somewhat provocatively, Conway continues that although this dominant patriotism was instrumental in the reconstruction of the unified Belgian state, it also laid the groundwork for the gradual disintegration of this same Belgian state in later years: when Belgian patriotism eventually deflated, and the regional sub-nationalisms of Flanders and Wallonia re-emerged, the specific unitarian political order was up for discussion again.

Periods of regime change

Conway's analysis of the reconstruction leading to a re-emergence of the 'mildly reformed version of the pre-war status quo' is very convincing, as is his idea that the gradual normalisation of Belgium's societal and political order can be seen as an exemplary case for the post-war Western European state. Most countries can claim a more thorough political renewal in the aftermath of the war – for example, the installation of the Fourth Republic in France – but in essence the parliamentary liberal democracy combined with a modernised welfare capitalist system was reinstated all over Western Europe.

However, in stressing the level of restoration, Conway often approaches the period of reconstruction somewhat teleologically, or as Conway writes himself, the book 'is focused more on outcomes than on processes, and more on what did happen than what failed to happen'. Because discussions and initiatives with regard to political and institutional reform in Belgium did not end up being very effective, Conway hardly takes them into account. Of course this is a valid choice, but reading *The Sorrows of Belgium*, it is also clear that this perspective tends to obscure some factors that were crucial in the process of reconstruction and instrumental in understanding the outcome. For example, neither the reinstatement of the Parliament, nor the question of what happened with local democratic institutions, such as city councils, are taken into account in the analysis of the reconstruction. This is striking because in both France and in the Netherlands, the incorporation of representatives of the Resistance in temporary city councils was instrumental in easing relations between the Resistance and the newly reinstated state; also, in these countries the reinstatement of temporary parliaments turned out to be a key moment in the reshuffling of the political relations and balances of power. As such, I would have expected at least an explanation of why such processes are ignored in Conway's analysis of the Belgian context.

Conway's perspective allows for a convincing argument that Belgium's later constitutional problems find their roots in the post-war reconstruction, but it does little to further a better understanding of the mechanisms at play during periods of regime change themselves. This is a bit of a missed opportunity, as *The Sorrows of Belgium* offers more than enough material for such analysis. To make this more concrete I provide three examples.

First, Conway's study shows very clearly how a returning or newly installed government needs to gain the support of as many social and political groups as possible. During the war new elites emerged everywhere – whether it was in the economic field, the administration, or in the Resistance – and neglecting these would have created adversaries for a fledgling government. Conway describes this in Belgium, but he does not put it in the context of a more general trend that appears to have existed after World War II all over Europe, namely that of allowing as many competing groups into the governmental and administrative folds as possible. Even Charles de Gaulle in France made sure to adopt a small number of Communist leaders into his governments.

Second, I would have appreciated a more detailed treatment of the general importance of the control over weapons in order to re-establish a legitimate power of the state during reconstruction, since the Belgian case illustrates this even more clearly than the French or Dutch ones. Being confronted with an armed Resistance while lacking any kind of operational police force, the consecutive Belgian governments were in no position to enforce policy such as the disarmament of the various Resistance groups or the dismantling of the black market. If not for the explicit support of the (armed) Allied authorities, and lacking the network of temporary administrative institutions at various levels that De Gaulle had set up in France, the Belgian governments would have hardly managed to get anything done.

Third, Conway's analysis lacks an explicit deliberation on the decisive role individuals can play during times of transition. In the absence of clear procedures and rules, personal initiative can have a strong reach, as can be illustrated by De Gaulle's attempts to seize power, or by Van Acker's initiatives, including his many dealings with King Leopold III, his attempts to unite the main political forces into a government of national unity and his insistence on a strict policy of state austerity. At the same time, Conway rightly points out the limits of this kind of personal influence. While Van Acker was able to keep the Communists in the fold, he could not prevent the rapid return of discord between the two main political forces – the Catholics and the socialists. De Gaulle wished to remain the leader of all Frenchmen and as such refused to bind himself to a political party; however, he was unable to prevent the return of a political order dominated by party dynamics – an order in which he no longer had a place.

The element of chance

Comparing *The Sorrows of Belgium* with the process of reconstruction in France and the Netherlands can help to shed light on the specific characteristics and problems of transition periods, but it also highlights that the routes available during a regime change at any moment are always very much embedded in

and determined by the specific national context. The Belgian Resistance for example, hardly found the time to mobilise due to the rapid liberation of the country, while parts of France were effectively liberated by local armed groups of the Maquis who were often reluctant to hand over their position of power to the representatives of the government of De Gaulle. While the Belgian government in exile was somewhat hesitant to claim power after the liberation, De Gaulle prepared vigorously for such a takeover. The upsurge of patriotism could lead to very different, and sometimes even opposite, consequences: while the Belgian patriotism of 1944-1947 reinstated the pre-war constitution, being a good Frenchman implied an absolute aversion to the pre-war Third Republic, combined with the support for a thorough renewal of the state.

The Dutch and the Belgian reconstruction appear to have run similar courses, with a few obvious differences: in contrast to the Belgian King Leopold III, who was a major cause of national discord, Queen Wilhelmina was at the very centre of renewed Dutch patriotism; and whereas the Belgian plans and hopes for constitutional reform quickly evaporated after the liberation, the Dutch cry for renewal and 'doorbraak' dominated the political order until the first post-war elections. The main difference however, was determined by the military liberation. Belgium was liberated in a matter of weeks, whereas the liberation of the Netherlands took all of eight months. Because of this, the interim governments in both countries found themselves confronted with very different sets of problems – for example, lack of food and fuel during the extremely cold winter of 1944-1945 led to social unrest, which in the Netherlands was mainly directed toward the German occupation regime, whereas in Belgium it was aimed at the newly formed government. In hindsight, the outcome of processes of reconstruction might often seem to be self-evident. However, arbitrary national differences such as these remind us that studies of reconstruction processes, such as Conway's excellent work, should not forget to take into account the element of chance. ◀

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