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An Unimportant Obstacle?
The Prusso-German General Staff, the Belgian Army and the Schlieffen Plan.

By Lukas Grawe

Abstract: To date, historians have scarcely dealt with Germany's assessments of Belgium. This is all the more surprising when one considers the importance of the kingdom in German war planning. Unlike his predecessors, in the event of a war on two fronts, Schlieffen wanted to strike France first. But what prompted Schlieffen to march through the neutral kingdom of Belgium and thus to violate international law, which he knew must have serious political consequences? And to what extent did the assessment of the Belgian army play a role in this strategy? The following explanations seek to answer these questions and to illustrate the motives of Schlieffen's successor Helmuth von Moltke (the younger), who mostly followed his predecessor's plans. Was the Belgian army "an unimportant obstacle" from the German point of view? And was this assessment still valid after the Belgian government had undertaken massive reforms of the army in 1909 and 1913? These are the questions that this essay will address.

Keywords: German General Staff; Belgium; military intelligence; Schlieffen Plan; First World War; German assessments; Belgian Army

In *The Guns of August*, one of her most famous books, the American historian Barbara Tuchman dealt with the outbreak of the First World War. Over more than 500 pages, she described the errors and misjudgements with which European generals and statesmen entered into what George F Kennan described as the "seminal catastrophe" of the 20th century.[1] In her description, Tuchman offered her understanding of the role of Alfred von Schlieffen, the Prussian Chief of General Staff (in office from 1891-1905), and his intention to let the German army march through Belgium:

> "Believing that war was a certainty and that Germany must enter it under conditions that gave her the most promise of success, Schlieffen deter-

1 Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2004; George F. Kennan, The Decline of Bismarck's European Order. Franco-Russian Relations, 1875-1890, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1979, p. 3.

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> mined not to allow the Belgian difficulty to stand in Germany's way. Of the two classes of Prussian officer, the bullnecked and the wasp-waisted, he belonged to the second. Monocled and effete in appearance, cold and distant in manner, he concentrated with such single-mindedness on his profession that when an aide, at the end of an all-night staff ride in East Prussia, pointed out to him the beauty of the river Pregel sparkling in the rising sun, the General gave a brief, hard look and replied, 'An unimportant obstacle.' So too, he decided, was Belgian neutrality."[2]

In this vivid description, Tuchman leaves unanswered the question of whether the Prusso-German general staff really did recklessly violate Belgian neutrality and whether it regarded the Belgian army as *quantité négligeable*, as this entry suggests. To date, historians have also scarcely dealt with Germany's assessments of Belgium.[3] This is all the more surprising when one considers the importance of the kingdom in German war planning.

The German general staff had already begun discussing Belgium's strategic importance during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71. At that time it seemed unnecessary to violate Belgian neutrality, as the border with France was still completely unfortified. Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke (in office from 1857-1888) therefore never thought of directing German troops across the Meuse.[4] He did not waver from this position during the Boulanger crisis of 1887, when the German Empire and France were once again on the brink of war. Moreover, Moltke did not believe that the French army would advance through Belgium.[5] The general staff's long held reluctance to violate Belgian neutrality is clear from

2 Tuchman, *The Guns of August, cit*., p. 21.

3 Exceptions that can be mentioned are: Jacques Willequet, «Appréciations allemandes sur la valeur de l'armee belge et les perspectives de guerre avant 1914», *Revue internationale d'histoire militaire*, 20 (1959), pp. 630–641; Horst Lademacher, *Die belgische Neutralität als Problem der europäischen Politik 1830-1914*, Ludwig Röhrscheid, Bonn, 1971, especially pp. 427-443; David Stevenson, «Battlefield or Barrier? Rearmament and Military Planning in Belgium, 1902-1914», *The International History Review*, 29, 3 (2007), pp. 473–507 and Christoph Brüll, Christophe Bechet, «Eine lästige Garantie. Die belgische Neutralität in den deutschen und französischen Kriegsszenarien», in Jürgen Angelow and Johannes Grossmann (Eds.), *Wandel, Umbruch, Absturz. Perspektiven auf das Jahr 1914,* Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2014, pp. 111–123.

4 Eberhard Kessel, *Moltke*, F. Koehler, Stuttgart, 1957, pp. 703-713. For Moltke's war plans see Ferdinand v. Schmerfeld (Ed.), *Die deutschen Aufmarschpläne 1871-1890*, Berlin, Ernst Siegfried Mittler & Sohn, 1929.

5 Memorandum by Moltke, 1887, in: Schmerfeld, *Die deutschen Aufmarschpläne*, *cit*., pp. 122-128, here p. 125.

a conversation between Bismarck and Moltke's deputy and later successor Alfred von Waldersee (in office from 1888-1891). When the Chancellor asked whether it would not be "expedient to march through Belgium in breach of neutrality",[6] the Quartermaster General strictly rejected such a move, stressing that it would be better if the French breached neutrality and suffered the accompanying odium.

The general staff's position fundamentally changed under Waldersee's successor Alfred von Schlieffen. Unlike his predecessors, in the event of a war on two fronts, Schlieffen wanted to strike France first. Only then, he argued, was a quick and decisive victory possible. While Moltke and Waldersee thought that a total victory was unrealistic in a coming war, Schlieffen believed that the swift destruction of the French army could offer a path to success.[7] Consequently, shortly after taking office in 1891, Schlieffen began to discuss the risks and benefits of violating Belgian neutrality.[8] Initially, advancing into the neighbouring kingdom was rejected in view of the British position. However, as a slow deterioration of German-British relations set in in 1896, Schlieffen seemed to have a good argument for starting to draft serious plans for a march through Belgium.[9]

The first documentary evidence of Schlieffen's intentions to violate neutrality dates back to 1897. The Chief of Staff emphasised that a German offensive against France should "not be afraid to violate not only the neutrality of Luxembourg but also that of Belgium."[10] German troops should attack the left flank of the French armies positioned on the Franco-German border, thus swiftly destroying them. Schlieffen initially thought of marching through southern Belgium (the Belgian province Luxembourg), but continued to develop his plan. In his famous 1905 memorandum ("War against France"), he even proposed sending German troops

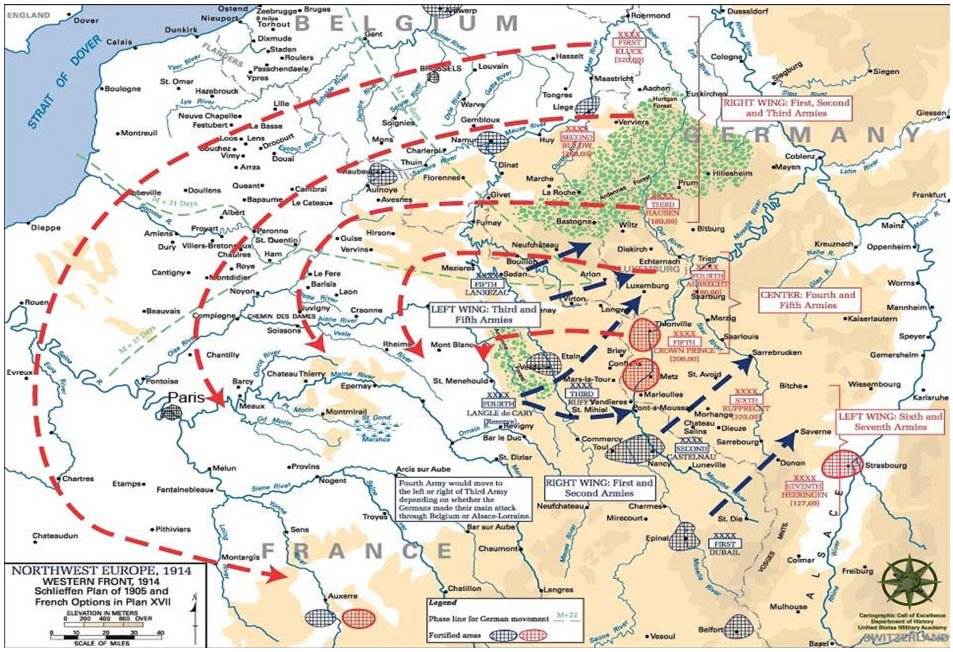
6 Diary entry by Waldersees, 10 July 1888, in: Alfred v. Waldersee, *Denkwürdigkeiten des General-Feldmarschalls Alfred Grafen von Waldersee, bearb. und hrsg. v. Heinrich Otto Meisner. Erster Band: 1832-1888*, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, Stuttgart, 1922, p. 412.

7 Annika Mombauer, «German War Plans», in Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig (Eds.), *War planning 1914,* Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 48–79, p. 52 and Gerhard P. Gross, *Mythos und Wirklichkeit. Geschichte des operativen Denkens im deutschen Heer von Moltke d.Ä. bis Heusinger*, Schöningh, Paderborn, 2012, pp. 55-56.

8 Memorandum by Schlieffen, April 1891, in: Wilhelm Dieckmann, „Der Schlieffenplan", 1937/38, BArch, RH 61/347, fol. 109.

9 Wilhelm Dieckmann, „Der Schlieffenplan", 1937/38, BArch, RH 61/347, fol. 113.

10 Memorandum by Schlieffen, 2 August 1897, in: Ibid., fol. 114-118, here fol. 115.



across the Meuse and thus passing through the heartland of Belgium and the Dutch province of Limburg, before attacking the flank of the French armies and pushing them back against Switzerland.[11]

But what prompted Schlieffen to march through the neutral kingdom and thus to violate international law, which he knew must have serious political consequences? And to what extent did the assessment of the Belgian army play a role in this strategy? The following explanations seek to answer these questions and to illustrate the motives of Schlieffen's successor Helmuth von Moltke (the younger) (in office from 1906-1914), who mostly followed his predecessor's plans. Was the Belgian army really "an unimportant obstacle" from the German point of view? And was this assessment still valid after the Belgian government had undertaken massive reforms of the army in 1909 and 1913? These are the questions that this essay will address.

11 For Schlieffen's war planning see Gerhard RITTER, *Der Schlieffenplan. Kritik eines Mythos*, Oldenbourg, München, 1956 and Hans G. EHLERT, Michael EPKENHANS, Gerhard P. GROSS (Eds.), *Der Schlieffenplan. Analysen und Dokumente*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 2006.

Why Belgium?


Graf Alfred von Schlieffen (1906)

The general staff's military intelligence branch played a central role in Schlieffen's decision to march through Belgium. It had meticulously observed and analysed France's fortifications along the French-German border and come to the conclusion that a rapid German advance through this defence system, which had been intensified since the 1870s, was not possible. The 4th department, being responsible for the observation of France and Belgium's fortifications, repeatedly devised attacks on individual French forts,[12] but had always stressed that a rapid fall of the whole line was impossible. Other high-ranking officers in the general staff expressed similar views.[13] Speed was, however, a condition sine qua non for a German victory, since the French army had to be defeated before the slow-mobilising Russian troops could invade East Prussia. In a 1898 memorandum, Schlieffen considered it necessary to bypass the "Great Wall built along the Moselle and Meuse rivers", but "not through Switzerland, where a war-ready army would have to be defeated and the fortified Jura passes overcome before entering into battle with the French under unfavourable conditions". On the contrary, the French fortresses could only be circumvented in the north "through Luxembourg, which has no army, and Belgium, which will want to withdraw its relatively weak army into fortifications", especially since it is "easier [...] and more effective" here, "because it directly hits the enemy's line of retreat".[14]

12 On the functioning of the fortress departments see Franz v. LENSKI, *Lern- und Lehrjahre in Front und Generalstab*, Bernard & Graefe, Berlin, 1939, p. 351.

13 In 1895, Quartermaster General Köpke came to the conclusion that an attack on the French fortress front was unfeasible. Wilhelm Dieckmann, „Der Schlieffenplan", 1937/38, BArch, RH 61/347, fol. 103-108.

14 Memorandum by Schlieffen, October 1898, in: Wilhelm Dieckmann, „Der Schlieffenplan", 1937/38, BArch, RH 61/347, fol. 169-176, here fol. 172-173. For Schlieffen's ear-

Schlieffen cited several reasons for this assessment: Not only was it almost impossible to pass through Switzerland geographically, but an attacker would have to face the Swiss army, which was considered to be formidable.[15] The only remaining route was through Belgium: Schlieffen considered the Belgian army to be weak and unfit for war. Added to this were the geographical and infrastructural circumstances in Belgium. It "has the character of a very hilly country", according to a military geographical description of Belgium written by the general staff. "Forests and meadows are rare, the heavily cultivated, fertile farmland feeds a dense and prosperous population, and the road network is good. The terrain is equally suitable for massive armies marching through as it is for battles".[16] Belgium also had a "dense network of railways, excellent roads and waterways", which made it "extremely easy to move and pursue large numbers of troops".[17] Schlieffen had expressed views along these lines shortly after taking office.[18] The general staff studied the geographical and infrastructural conditions abroad during reconnaissance trips by general staff officers.[19] Their results were then evaluated by the topographic, trigonometric and cartographic departments.[20] Before the First World War, Germany was well aware that Belgium had a road network of 10.000 kilometres and, with 4.700 kilometres of railway lines, the densest network in Western Europe. Nine major routes connecting Germany and France passed through Belgium.[21] Finally, Schlieffen also considered the food supply

ly planning see Robert T. Foley, «The Origins of the Schlieffen Plan», *War in History*, 10 (2003), pp. 222–232.

15 For a German estimation of the Swiss army see Hans R. Fuhrer, Michael Olsansky, «Die „Südumfassung". Zur Rolle der Schweiz im Schlieffen- und im Moltkeplan», in Hans G. Ehlert, Michael Epkenhans and Gerhard P. Gross (Eds.), *Der Schlieffenplan. Analysen und Dokumente,* Paderborn, Schöningh, 2006, pp. 311–338.

16 Großer Generalstab, Militär-geographische Beschreibung von Nordost-Frankreich, Luxemburg, Belgien, dem südlichen Teil der Niederlande und dem nordwestlichen Teil der Schweiz, Berlin 1908, BArch, PH 3/2008, p. 70.

17 Ibid., p. 74.

18 Wilhelm Dieckmann, „Der Schlieffenplan", 1937/38, BArch, RH 61/347, fol. 110-111.

19 For the importance of the reconnaissance trips see Lukas Grawe, «Offizier-Erkundungsreisen als Mittel der deutschen Feindaufklärung vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg», *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift*, 76, 2 (2017), pp. 419–458.

20 Oskar Albrecht, *Beiträge zum militärischen Vermessungs- und Kartenwesen und zur Militärgeographie in Preußen (1803-1921)*, Amt für Geoinformationswesen der Bundeswehr, Euskirchen, 2004.

21 Stevenson, *Battlefield or Barrier?*, *cit*., p. 476.

situation for German troops to be favourable: "Rich Belgium and rich northern France can supply a lot, and under the appropriate pressure, they will also gather the supplies they may lack outside of their borders."[22]

In addition to technical and strategic motivations, Schlieffen also voiced his fear early on that France itself could violate Belgian neutrality and launch an attack on the German troops' flank. He was already entertaining this possibility in 1892, which is why he spoke out against a stronger German fortification of Alsace-Lorraine, fearing that it would tempt the French to march through Belgium.[23] "If we were to attack Belfort-Montmedy along the entire front in blind faith in the sanctity of neutrality", Schlieffen pointed out in 1905 in a preliminary draft of the Schlieffen Plan, "our right flank would soon be enveloped by a practical and unscrupulous opponent moving through southern Belgium and Luxembourg in the most effective way". He continued to have little confidence in Belgian countermeasures, which would, he was sure, either be insufficient or come too late. Consequently, "for the Germans, maintaining Luxembourg and Belgium's neutrality in the event of a war against France [...] is precluded by the laws of self-defence. Of this the French are now as convinced as we are."[24] So it was not only the "topographical reasons", as Jehuda Wallach believes,[25] that led Schlieffen to march through Belgium, but also the fear of a French army applying that exact strategy and attacking through Belgium itself.

If Friedrich von Mantey, an adjutant to Schlieffen's successor Helmuth von Moltke, is to be believed, the Chief of Staff did not take the decision to violate Belgian neutrality lightly. Mantey argued that, at the end of 1903, the German military attaché working in Brussels visited the general staff building several times to discuss details of the plan with Schlieffen. Schlieffen had also ordered the 2nd department to investigate whether it was possible to channel nine army corps between Belgium and Verdun. In addition, an officer of the general staff

22 Schlieffen, „Krieg gegen Frankreich", 1905/06, in: Ritter, *Der Schlieffenplan*, *cit*., pp. 145-160, here p. 158.

23 Schlieffen's report for the National Defence Commission, 1892, in: Wilhelm Dieckmann, „Der Schlieffenplan", 1937/38, BArch, RH 61/347, fol. 110-111.

24 Schlieffen, „Krieg gegen Frankreich", Vorentwurf III, 1905/06, in: Ritter, *Der Schlieffenplan*, *cit*., pp. 81-82.

25 Jehuda L. Wallach, *Das Dogma der Vernichtungsschlacht. Die Lehren von Clausewitz und Schlieffen und ihre Wirkungen in zwei Weltkriegen*, Bernard & Graefe, Frankfurt am Main, 1967, p. 89.

had screened the contracts concerning Belgian neutrality in the Foreign Office.[26] Schlieffen is also said to have stressed that "Europe would be destroyed by a long war and could not tolerate it, and that under the given circumstances the war could only be shortened by a march through Belgium. Belgium would have to take this 'sacrifice' upon itself".[27] He did not, however, give much thought to the political consequences for Germany of breaching the international treaty, which were first and foremost the likely intervention of Great Britain and, in addition, the negative stigma that followed the violation of Belgian neutrality.[28]

Schlieffen's successor Helmuth von Moltke adhered to the fundamental concept of the plan devised by his predecessor – an initial offensive strike against France via Belgium – even though he was far less convinced of its success.[29] The possibility of a formidable Belgian resistance particularly concerned him. Thus, when Moltke was appointed Quartermaster General in 1904, becoming Schlieffen's deputy, he immediately communicated his concerns to the Chief of Staff: In the event of a German attack, the Belgians would defend their territory with full force and destroy the Meuse bridges, the main railway bridges and tunnels. He also cited his uncle, the elder Moltke, as having said "in enemy territory we would be poor in railways, while the enemies would be rich in railways".[30] Schlieffen did not believe that the much-needed Belgian railways would be destroyed,[31] but Moltke kept coming back to it and made sure the head of the railway department was constantly keeping him informed on the subject.[32]

Apart from the railway-related concerns, Moltke also seemed to have more

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26 Friedrich von Mantey, „Wirken und Denken des deutschen Generalstabes", 1946-48, BArch, MSG 2/952, pp. 20-21.

27 *Ibid*., p. 27.

28 Ritter, *Der Schlieffenplan*, *cit*., pp. 81-82.

29 Stig Förster, «Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges, 1871-1914. Metakritik eines Mythos», *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, 54 (1995), pp. 61–95, pp. 83-95.

30 Mantey, „Wirken und Denken des deutschen Generalstabes", 1946-48, BArch, MSG 2/952, p. 23.

31 In 1904, on a general staff trip, he said : "I was told that in the event of war with Belgium, we would find a destroyed railway network. I think differently. The Belgian railway network is the best link between our network and France's". Cited in: Wallach, *Das Dogma der Vernichtungsschlacht*, *cit*., p. 131.

32 Mantey, „Wirken und Denken des deutschen Generalstabes", 1946-48, BArch, MSG 2/952, p. 23.

scruples than Schlieffen when it came to violating the neutrality of the Benelux countries. To preserve the Netherlands as a "windpipe" and not be cut off from international markets in the event of a British naval blockade, he amended the German war plans so the Dutch province of Limburg would not be entered by German troops.[33] He was also concerned about the breach of Belgian neutrality. In 1909 he sent Hermann von Kuhl, the head of the 3rd department, responsible for the observation of Belgium and France, to the French fortress line. Kuhl was tasked with investigating whether it was not possible to break through the chain of fortifications. In his subsequent report, the general staff officer came to the conclusion that an attacking army "would be stranded outside the fortifications for a long time" and that in the meantime the Russian army would invade East Prussia.[34]

Four years later, the new Secretary of the Foreign Office, Gottlieb von Jagow, summoned the Chief of Staff to re-examine the need for the march through Belgium thoroughly in view of the political implications.[35] Moltke promised to do so. For a short time, he even considered resuming his uncle's strategy of attacking Russia first while merely defending Germany's western borders, but finally came to reject it.[36] In the 1913/14 winter war game, the Chief of Staff once again practiced launching a campaign against France without violating Belgian neutrality.[37] However, the results were still unsatisfying. As he told Jagow, the march through Belgium seemed to be the only way to defeat the French army within a short period of time and thus to achieve a total victory for the German

33 Annika Mombauer, «Der Moltkeplan: Modifikation des Schlieffenplans bei gleichen Zielen?», in Hans G. Ehlert, Michael Epkenhans and Gerhard P. Gross (Eds.), *Der Schlieffenplan. Analysen und Dokumente,* Paderborn, Schöningh, 2006, pp. 79–99, pp. 89-91.

34 Interrogation of Hermann von Kuhl in the Weimar fact-finding comittee, 11 July 1923, in: Das Werk des Untersuchungsausschusses der Deutschen Verfassunggebenden Nationalversammlung und des Deutschen Reichstages 1919-1926, 4. Reihe: Die Ursachen des Deutschen Zusammenbruchs im Jahre 1918, vol. 1, Berlin 1925, pp. 154-155.

35 Gottlieb von Jagow, „Der Durchmarsch durch Belgien", April 1931, PA-AA, NL Jagow, vol. 8, fol. 48-49.

36 Mantey, „Wirken und Denken des deutschen Generalstabes", 1946-48, BArch, MSG 2/952, p. 24. For the reasons see Lukas Grawe, *Deutsche Feindaufklärung vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg. Informationen und Einschätzungen des deutschen Generalstabs zu den Armeen Frankreichs und Russlands 1904 bis 1914*, Schöningh, Paderborn, 2017, pp. 431-436.

37 Tappen to Haeften, 20 October 1930, BArch, N 56/4, fol. 295.

Empire.[38]

"It is not pleasant to begin the campaign by violating the territory of a neutral neighbouring state", Moltke noted in a comprehensive memorandum in early 1913. "But where the existence of our state is at stake, all consideration for others must take a back seat."[39] Despite all his misgivings, he continued to favour a march through Belgium and ultimately put forward the same arguments as Schlieffen. "France has barricaded its eastern border", he emphasised in the memorandum referred to above and agreed with Kuhl's report: "attacking the West head on would lead to a long conflict with the nature of a siege war and rule out a rapidly advancing offensive". Speed was however, considered a necessary precondition to achieving total victory. "In order to force the French to fight in the open field, the only way is to advance through Belgium, which would allow Germany to circumvent the fortified French front."[40] It was clear to Moltke that such strategy would not only add the Belgian, but also the British army to the list of Germany's enemies. However, Moltke felt respect for Belgium was too high of a price to pay for British neutrality.[41] An underestimation of the British army was just as much a part of this as a disdain for the Belgian forces. In addition, like Schlieffen, he spoke very highly of the Swiss army.[42] He ruled out a march through the Jura in any case.

Another notion Moltke shared with his predecessor, was the possibility of the French not respecting Belgian neutrality. A German memorandum on France's

38 Jagow, „Der Durchmarsch durch Belgien", April 1931, PA-AA, NL Jagow, vol. 8, fol. 50-51.

39 Memorandum by Moltke, „Verhalten Deutschlands in einem Dreibundkriege", February 1913, in: Erwin Hölzle, *Quellen zur Entstehung des Ersten Weltkrieges. Internationale Dokumente 1901-1914*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1978, pp. 153-159, here pp. 156-157.

40 Ibid. Moltke argued similarly at the end of 1912. Moltke to Bethmann Hollweg, „Denkschrift über die militärpolitische Lage", 21 December 1912, in: Reichsarchiv (Ed.), *Kriegsrüstung und Kriegswirtschaft. Die militärische, wirtschaftliche und finanzielle Rüstung Deutschlands von der Reichsgründung bis zum Ausbruch des Weltkrieges, Anlagenband*, Berlin, Ernst Siegfried Mittler & Sohn, 1930, No. 54, pp. 163-164.

41 Memorandum by Moltke, „Verhalten Deutschlands in einem Dreibundkriege", February 1913, in: Hölzle, *Quellen zur Entstehung des Ersten Weltkrieges*, *cit*., pp. 153-159, here pp. 156-157.

42 Moltke to Bülow, 23 February 1908, PA-AA, R 995. See also Fuhrer, Olsansky, *Die „Südumfassung"*, *cit*.

presumed operational intentions in the event of a war stated that the French side "may have the intention of invading Belgium and Luxembourg with heavy cavalry".[43] The head of the 2nd department, Gerhard Tappen, recalled after the First World War, that the German general staff officers felt "all the more entitled to enter Belgium, since we knew from the various reports of our military attachés and other publications and incidents that our opponents intended to do the same."[44] The general staff had prepared a special dossier, compiling information on a French march through Belgium.[45] These fears were further fuelled by reports that Belgium's own interpretation of its neutrality was one-sided: A German invasion would be considered a breach of treaty; a French on the other hand would not. Such rumours were mainly circulated by German newspapers. Even Schlieffen, for whom strategic reasoning was always foremost, joined in advancing this political reason to see his plan through. Belgium, he emphasised in his 1912 memorandum, "is considered neutral, but in fact it is not. More than thirty years ago, it fortified Liège and Namur to prevent Germany from invading its territory, but left its border with France wide open."[46] Schlieffen believed Germany should use this political argument, to justify the breach of Belgian neutrality.[47]

In the end, it was primarily France's well-developed fortification system, the Swiss Alps and the terrain and infrastructure of Belgium that persuaded the

43 „Vermutete erste Maßnahmen der Franzosen 1914/15", no date, BArch, PH 3/628, fol. 54. See also 3. Abteilung, „Aufmarsch und operative Absichten der Franzosen in einem zukünftigen deutsch-französischen Kriege", May 1912, rectified 1913/14, BArch, PH 3/256, fol. 22-23. In fact, the French Generalissimo Joffre had considered passing through Belgium, but the French Government prohibited such a move. Stefan SCHMIDT, «Frankreichs Plan XVII. Zur Interdependenz von Außenpolitik und militärischer Planung in den letzten Jahren vor Ausbruch des Großen Krieges», in Hans G. EHLERT, Michael EPKENHANS and Gerhard P. GROSS (Eds.), *Der Schlieffenplan. Analysen und Dokumente,* Paderborn, Schöningh, 2006, pp. 221–256, pp. 241-242.

44 Gerhard Tappen, Kriegserinnerungen, February 1921, BArch, RH 61/986, pp. 7-8.

45 Georg v. WALDERSEE, «Der deutsche Generalstab und die Kriegsschuld», *Deutscher Offizier-Bund*, 5, 8/9 (1926), 293-295, 338-339, p. 294.

46 Memorandum by Schlieffen, 28 December 1912, in: RITTER, *Der Schlieffenplan*, *cit*., pp. 181-190, here p. 186.

47 Abteilung Fremde Heere, „Die militärische Notwendigkeit Deutschlands, im August 1914 in Belgien einzumarschieren", 7 November 1918, BArch, PH 3/126, fol. 12-17 and Abteilung Fremde Heere, „Der deutsche Einmarsch in Belgien", no date (ca. 1919), BArch, PH 3/127, fol. 1-8. See also the written testimony of Moltke's former adjutant, Wilhelm von Dommes: „Gründe für die Entstehung und den Einmarsch in Belgien", Dommes to the Chief of the General Staff, 20 February 1919, BArch, N 78/34, fol. 3-25, here fol. 19.

German general staff to disregard the neutrality of the neighbouring country and invade. Although Moltke had far more problems with the planned breach of international law than Schlieffen did, the fear of a French offensive through Belgium and the assumption that the Belgian Kingdom had made arrangements with the Third Republic and Great Britain weighed more heavily than moral opprobrium. With marching through Belgium viewed by the general staff as a necessity if the coming war was to be won, German military intelligence then had the task of assessing whether the Belgian army should be considered a serious adversary.

The Belgian Army at the Turn of the Century

Shortly after the turn of the century, the German general staff did not believe the Belgian army to be well prepared for war. This evaluation was based on reports by the general staff's 3rd department, which was responsible for analysing not only the Belgian army, but also the armies of France, Great Britain and other Western European countries. It was one of three intelligence departments responsible for gathering information on foreign armies at that time.[48] This information was based on reports of German diplomats working on the ground, agent reports and, to a considerable extent, the press, the publications of the local military authorities or other accessible publications such as parliamentary debates.[49]

German military planning was based on the 3rd department's intelligence work that had confirmed for Schlieffen that Belgium would withdraw its "relatively weak army into fortresses"[50] in the event of a German invasion. The Belgian Army Act of 1902 had not expanded its peacetime standing army, leaving it at 48,000 men, Although a specially created military commission had proposed an increase, this was resisted by a broad anti-militarist movement in antebellum Belgium that consisted not only of the working classes, but also the ruling Catholic conservative party. Only liberal parties timidly advocated for further military endeavours and the introduction of universal conscription. However, the Army Act of 1902 only included provisions for drafting some 13,000 recruits an-

48 For the functioning of the intelligence departments see Grawe, *Deutsche Feindaufklärung vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, *cit*., pp. 37-54.

49 For the intelligence departments' sources see *ibid*., pp. 54-108.

50 Memorandum by Schlieffen, October 1898, in: Wilhelm Dieckmann, „Der Schlieffenplan", 1937/38, BArch, RH 61/347, fol. 169-176, here fol. 172-173.

Assessing the Belgian Army

nually, to be selected by lot. Furthermore, the conscription quota had to be approved by parliament every year. The 13,000 recruits were to be supplemented by 3,000 volunteers – a number that was never reached. The state of the Belgian army's equipment was also deplorable. Until 1908 the artillery did not have guns with a modern barrel recoil. Of the 180,000 soldiers available to Belgium in the event of a war, only 80,000 men belonged to the field army, while the rest were assigned to reserve units and manning fortresses.[51]

The military repercussions of Belgium's domestic disputes were often at the heart of the German military attachés' reports. These excellently trained officers were the main source of information for the general staff's intelligence departments. Most of them had worked in the general staff themselves, knew how its intelligence departments operated and were thus able to meet the information requirements optimally.[52] From 1901 to 1905, Detlof von Winterfeldt served as an attaché for Belgium. He was considered a highly competent officer, could con-

51 For the Belgian army at the turn of the century see Mario Draper, *The Belgian Army and Society from Independence to the Great War*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2018 and Stevenson, *Battlefield or Barrier?*, *cit.*, pp. 477-478.

52 Grawe, *Deutsche Feindaufklärung vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, *cit.*, pp. 54-77.

verse in French as if he were a native speaker and later became military attaché in Paris.[53] At the end of 1904, he reported to the general staff that the debate on the annual conscription quota had, as in previous years, degenerated into wild political squabbling. The Belgian war minister Alexandre Cousebant d'Alkemade had complained that the army would lose all self-confidence if it were constantly told that it was "completely broken and incapable of mounting a serious resistance".[54] On the contrary, he argued, the nation's defence had never been more secure, with the introduction of a new field gun imminent. Winterfeldt believed the war minister to be correct. In one of his reports, the military attaché said "Belgium will be able to muster a well-equipped, sizeable army with the necessary speed." However, he doubted

> "whether the troops possessed the inner spirit and the firing and combat training that would enable them to accomplish great tasks. [...] Much will depend on the industriousness of those who stand at the head of the army at crucial moments in time, but I would like to believe that, when push comes to shove, the Belgian Army command will base its behaviour not only on military but also on political considerations."[55]

Belgium's focus on politics was often to the detriment of the army, as, Winterfeldt argued, the planned expansion of the Antwerp fortress showed. Many Belgian military officers feared the bill supported by King Leopold II would fail, the German officer reported to Berlin,[56] despite the impression spread by the Belgian media, that the country's defences were in serious need of reinforcements. In view of the Franco-German tensions during the first Moroccan crisis of 1905/06, many Belgian newspapers had stressed that the army was not ready to defend the country against an aggressor.[57] Winterfeldt's successor, Karl Kageneck,[58] even observed that the Belgian parliament was beginning to doubt

53 For Winterfeldt see Lukas Grawe, «Report from Paris. The German Military Attaché in France, Detlof von Winterfeldt, and his views of the French Army, 1909-1914», *War in History*, 26, 4 (2019), pp. 470–494.

54 Winterfeldt, Military Report No. 611, 24 December 1904, PA-AA, R 4392.

55 Ibid.

56 Winterfeldt, Military Report No. 638, 16 June 1905, PA-AA, R 4393.

57 Winterfeldt, Military Report No. 640, 26 June 1905, PA-AA, R 4459.

58 Karl von Kageneck only served as military attaché in Brussels in 1906, before he took over the post of military attaché in Vienna, which he held until the end of the World War. On Kageneck see Günther Kronenbitter, *„Krieg im Frieden". Die Führung der k.u.k. Armee und die Großmachtpolitik Österreich-Ungarns 1906-1914*, Oldenbourg, München, 2003,

whether the planned enlistment of 13 classes was really sufficient to reach the army's official wartime strength of 187,000 men. However, Cousebant d'Alkemade pointed out that the army could still rely on the Civic Guard, which was under the Minister of the Interior's authority and included every male Belgian from 20 to 40 years of age who had not served as a soldier. In the event of a war, the Civic Guard's main tasks would be to patrol the borders, protect the roads connecting the front with vital supplies and reinforce the fortress crews. However, military attaché Kageneck did not think much of this institution. He said that "the sight of this Soldateska [...] is enough to not think too highly of the 18,582 defenders of the fatherland."[59]

Meanwhile, no further improvements of the Belgian army seemed to be in sight.[60] In addition, army leadership rarely carried out major manoeuvres, meaning the officers and crews' training left a lot to be desired, as Kageneck reported.[61] Moreover, the ruling clerical-conservative party continued to adhere to the previous system of army supplementation and strongly opposed the introduction of universal conscription. Its fear was that the Liberals' only reason for wanting to increase the army was to follow the French model and use the military to persecute the church. Kageneck stressed that the powerless war minister had no choice but to express his hope that the time for reform was not far off.[62] So it was of little help that the parliament approved the bill to expand the Antwerp fortress after all; Kageneck considered its fundamental design to be misguided and felt it would hardly be able to stop a German march through Belgium.[63]

The German general staff's military attachés were able to keep their superiors well informed on the Belgian army's lack of readiness for war during the Moroccan tensions.[64] This impression was further reinforced by a comprehensive

S. 308- 311 and Tim Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance. German Military Attaché Reporting from Vienna, 1879-1914*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2016, passim.

59 Kageneck, Military Report No. 674, 21 December 1905, BayHStA-KA, Gstb 223.

60 Kageneck, Military Report No. 702, 15 March 1906, PA-AA, R 4395.

61 Kageneck, Military Report No. 735, 15 August 1906, PA-AA, R 4396.

62 Kageneck, Military Report No. 752, 19 December 1906, PA-AA, R 4396.

63 Kageneck, Military Report No. 702, 15 March 1906, PA-AA, R 4395.

64 On the other hand, the general staff apparently knew nothing about the talks between Belgian Chief of Staff Ducarne and the British military attaché Barnadiston. See Paul Herre, *Die kleinen Staaten Europas und die Entstehung des Weltkrieges*, C.H. Beck, München, 1937, pp. 190-194 and Mario Draper, «„Are We Ready?": Belgium and the Entente's Mil-

annual review written by the new military attaché Martin Renner, who began his tenure in Belgium in 1906 and continued in this position until 1913.[65] After only a few weeks of service in Brussels, the German officer had come to the conclusion

> "that little of the warlike spirit of the old Walloon regiments has been passed on to the Belgians of today. Despite the fact that they have a large number of capable officers at their disposal, even in the higher ranks, and despite all of the intentions of much-appreciated Chief of General Staff Ducarne to act offensively, I doubt that Belgian leadership, and especially the troops, will be up to a task as the one mentioned above. It will be difficult to move an army forward that has, from the very beginning, been concerned about withdrawing. A swift opponent with a firm grip will send it retreating to a rear base – provided, of course, it receives no active support from another power."[66]

A Belgian officer confirmed what Renner had already deduced; given the Belgians' lack of training the army would not be able to engage in lengthy offensive strategies and it would always need a safe place to which to retreat. Consequently, it would not stray too far from its base in Antwerp. While the year 1906 was generally a satisfactory one for the Belgian army, (Renner referred in particular to the introduction of a new barrel recoil gun, the planned expansion of Antwerp, the improvement in officers' salaries and the conducting of major military exercises), little progress had been made in training troops for the war, or in introducing universal conscription.[67] "The officers have skills and a will to perform", Renner reported elsewhere, but they must realise "that under the present system they cannot mould the troops into what they would like them to be."[68]

Given these descriptions, it is not surprising that the German general staff was convinced that no vigorous Belgian resistance would impede the Schlieffen Plan.[69] On the contrary, the 3rd department fully agreed with the German military

itary Planning for a War Against Germany, 1906–1914», *The International History Review*, 41, 6 (2019), pp. 1216–1234, pp. 1218-1221.

65 After his service in Belgium, he was an attaché in London until the outbreak of the war and then in The Hague from 1915 to 1917. On Renner see Auswärtiges Amt (Ed.), *Biographisches Handbuch des deutschen Auswärtigen Dienstes 1871-1945*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 2008, pp. 620-621.

66 Renner, Military Report No. 1, 4 January 1907, PA-AA, R 4396.

67 *Ibid*.

68 Renner, Military Report No. 43, 21 April 1907, PA-AA, R 4396.

69 A similar conclusion is also reached by Lademacher, *Die belgische Neutralität*, *cit*., p. 431.

observers' unflattering assessments. A memorandum on Belgian tactics emphasised that the Belgian army was of "very little value. It is hardly on a par with our reserve divisions. Left to its own devices, it is not very well suited for major offensive operations, is likely to avoid making decisions in the field and will limit itself to defending the Belgian '*réduit national*' Antwerp."[70] All branches of the armed forces were noticeably suffering under inadequate training, insufficient financial resources and obsolete material. The main reason for this was, according to the memorandum, "the reluctance of the greater part of the nation to accept military service as a personal duty." Consequently, the army administration had not been able to create "a field army that can cope with the demands of national defence."[71] Based on these judgements, Moltke, in a 1908 letter to Chancellor Bülow, classified the Belgian army as "militarily inferior" and "not capable of solving major tasks".[72]

The German General Staff and Reforms of the Belgian Army

The Franco-German tensions of 1905/06 had made it very clear to the Belgian government that a European war would probably be fought on Belgian soil. It seemed increasingly likely that France or the German Empire would violate Belgian neutrality. These fears were fuelled by an essay Schlieffen wrote in the *Neue Revue* in which the former Chief of Staff made numerous allusions to a German march through Belgium.[73] The Belgian government was also increasingly suspicious of Great Britain, since it no longer seemed to consider itself the unselfish guarantor of Belgian integrity. After long and heated debates, the new Belgian minister of war, Joseph Hellebaut, was finally able to present a new law on military service on 8 December 1909, which broke with the previous lottery system, abolished deputizing and the possibility of redeeming, and thus was a step towards military service as a personal duty. From then on, one son per family was drafted into the army, while the length of service was reduced. With the

70 3. Abteilung, „Die Taktik der belgischen Armee", January 1908, BayHStA-KA, Gstb 223, pp. 3-4.

71 *Ibid*., p. 1.

72 Moltke to Bülow, 23 February 1908, PA-AA, R 995.

73 Schlieffen, „Der Krieg in der Gegenwart", in: Alfred v. SCHLIEFFEN, *Gesammelte Schriften, Bd. 1*, Ernst Siegfried Mittler & Sohn, Berlin, 1913, pp. 11-22. Moltke therefore also had to appease the political leadership around Chancellor Bülow and the German envoy in Brussels, Wallwitz. Moltke to Bülow, 19 January 1909, PA-AA, R 4461.

force that was kept on alert during peacetime remaining untouched, however, the new law proved to be an unsuitable compromise.[74]

Efforts to reform the army were registered by Renner early on, but so was the resistance with which they were met. In mid-August 1908, he reported on numerous objections to the army reform voiced by the ruling clerical-conservative party. They were mainly directed against military service being a personal duty, while the liberals were in favour of reducing the length of service.[75] Either way, Renner judged the prospects for reform to be poor, "because (apart from the military) no party and hardly anyone in Belgium is seriously concerned about the reforms themselves, but rather only about exploiting the military issue in the party's political interests."[76] Moltke himself expressed similar doubts at the prospect of a reform of the Belgian army. In its present state, "the Belgian army is less militarily important than our reserve troops."[77]

In the following months, despite the German's dire predictions, war minister Hellebaut succeeded in whipping up majority support for the government's reform plans.[78] This hardly changed the German general staff's view of the Belgian army, however, as the new law was not considered to be particularly efficacious. In its annual report, the 3rd department emphasised that although military service was now more evenly distributed across Belgian society overall, the goal of integrating the educated class had clearly not been achieved.[79] On the contrary, reducing the length of service seemed to have exacerbated the soldiers' poor level of education. "The Belgian soldiers look good, are well dressed and their formal training is not bad", Renner noted in one of his reports. "It gets rough once they start working in the field and higher army leadership comes into play."[80] Moltke therefore continued to believe that "the inept Belgian troops will easily be blown to pieces unless the Belgian army does not engage in a battle and instead with-

74 Stevenson, *Battlefield or Barrier?*, *cit*., p. 480.

75 Renner, Military Report No. 98, 16 August 1908, PA-AA, R 4397.

76 Renner, Military Report No. 122, 31 October 1908, PA-AA, R 4398.

77 „Die militärische Leistungsfähigkeit der wichtigsten Staaten Europa's", Moltke to Bülow, 29 January 1909, PA-AA, R 995.

78 See the reports by Wallwitz in PA-AA, R 4399.

79 3. Abteilung, „Jahresbericht 1910", December 1910, BayHStA-KA, Gstb 163, p. 18.

80 Renner, Military Report No. 118, 30 September 1910, PA-AA, R 4400.

draws to Antwerp, which would then have to be encircled."[81]

The German general staff was not alone in its disparaging assessments. French and British military observers also classified the Belgian army as unfit for war.[82] French military leadership in particular had a great interest in a powerful Belgian army, since it was supposed to nip a German attack on France in the bud. The country's military press therefore eagerly tried to stimulate further reform measures in Belgium.[83]

Other problems were added to the inadequate reforms of the Belgian army: The fortresses of Namur and Liège, which were supposed to secure the Meuse valley against a German or French invasion, not only had serious shortcomings, but had not been comprehensively modernised for several years. The 4th department of the German general staff took a close look at the two fortresses – mainly with the help of general staff officers travelling incognito[84] – and identified several weaknesses that would make an attack on the fortresses likely to succeed. A memorandum from the department emphasised that Liège in particular would hardly be capable of "prolonged resistance", "since the extension of the intermediate area has not been prepared and the troop manning the fortress is too weak". In many cases, an attacker would be able to find "cover for a close approach of the forts. Their artillery equipment cannot make up for these deficiencies, seeing as ¾ of their armoured combat guns are flat cannons."[85] In the following years, the 4th department could detect no efforts made to remedy these weaknesses.[86]

In view of the poor state of Belgium's defence systems, the German general

81 Moltke's statement on the Schlieffen plan, 1911, in: Ritter, *Der Schlieffenplan*, *cit*., pp. 178-180, here p. 179.

82 For France see Albert Duchesne, «L'armée et la politique militaire belges de 1871 à 1920», *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 39 (1961), 391–430, 1092–1126 and Albert Duchesne, «L'armée et la politique militaire belges de 1871 à 1920», *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 40 (1962), 371–384, 1188–1219. For Great Britain see Stevenson, *Battlefield or Barrier?*, *cit*., passim.

83 Lademacher, *Die belgische Neutralität*, *cit*., pp. 412-426.

84 One of the travelling officers was Erich Ludendorff. See Franz Uhle-Wettler, *Erich Ludendorff in seiner Zeit. Soldat - Stratege - Revolutionär. Eine Neubewertung*, K. Vowinckel, Berg, 1996, pp. 93-94 and Holger H. Herwig, *Marne 1914. Eine Schlacht, die die Welt veränderte?*, Schöningh, Paderborn, 2015, p. 107.

85 Großer Generalstab, 4. Abteilung, „Die belgischen und holländischen Befestigungen und die Grundsätze ihrer Verteidigung", Berlin 1908, BayHStA-KA, Gstb 224, p. 5.

86 See the „Jahresberichte" of the 4th department in BayHStA-KA, Gstb 489.

staff felt it had several options. The weak Belgian army did not seem able to obstruct the Schlieffen Plan and its deficient fortifications meant that there was no need to violate Dutch neutrality. Under these circumstances, a strategy Moltke and the 2nd department had drawn up in 1908 to avoid marching through the Netherlands, namely a *coup de main* on the fortresses of Liège, seemed quite possible.[87] However, a precondition for this line of attack was that it had to be mounted before the Belgians were able to patrol the area between the individual forts. This meant there would be no time for diplomacy once the war broke out, and the *coup de main* on Liège would have to occur even before the German army had finished mobilising. Thus, military necessities defined the scope of action available to German politicians, who were not informed about the plan.[88]

The second Moroccan crisis, which brought France, Britain and the German Empire to the brink of war in 1911, finally proved to be a decisive turning point for the Belgian army. Convinced of the growing likelihood of a European war and the arms race of the great powers, even the clerical-conservative Belgian government could no longer deny the need for far-reaching military reforms. The process seemed to require speed, with the army openly discussing its grievances in parliament and the British military attaché making it clear to the Belgian Chief of General Staff Jungbluth that Great Britain would land troops in Antwerp in the event of a Franco-German war, if necessary even without Belgian consent.[89] Prime Minister Charles de Broqueville proved to be a particularly energetic advocate of strengthening the army. In several secret sessions of parliament, he justified the need for reform with the European arms race, the strategic railway con-

87 For the coup de main on Liège see Moltke, „Über den Rückzug an der Marne“, summer 1915, in: Helmuth v. Moltke, *Erinnerungen – Briefe – Dokumente 1877-1916. Ein Bild vom Kriegsausbruch, erster Kriegsführung und Persönlichkeit des ersten militärischen Führers des Krieges, hrsg. von Eliza von Moltke*, Der Kommende Tag Verlag, Stuttgart, 1922, pp. 428-439, here pp. 431-433 and Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, 2001, pp. 96-98. British and French military observers also considered the Liège fortresses vulnerable to a coup de main. See Duruy‘s military report, 3 June 1911, cited in: Stevenson, *Battlefield or Barrier?*, *cit*., pp. 484-485 and Bridges to Villiers, 19 October 1911, in: British Documents on the Origins of the War, vol. 8, annex to No. 319, pp. 388-389.

88 Ernst Hemmer, *Die deutschen Kriegserklärungen von 1914*, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1935, pp. 113-131 and Ritter, *Der Schlieffenplan*, *cit*., p. 95.

89 Johannes V. Bredt, *Die belgische Neutralität und der Schlieffensche Feldzugplan*, Georg Stilke, Berlin, 1929, p. 15 and Herre, *Die kleinen Staaten Europas*, *cit*., pp. 210-211 and 215-216.

struction of the German Empire at the Belgian border and the possibility of a surprise attack on Liège.[90]

After fierce debates in the Belgian parliament, which lasted from autumn 1912 until the summer of 1913, the "*Loi sur la milice*" was finally adopted and came into force at the end of August 1913. Instead of the "*un file par famille*" system, it introduced universal conscription, thereby doubling the size of the field army from 80,000 to 150,000 men and increasing the army's combat strength from 180,000 to 340,000 soldiers. 33,000 men plus 2,000 volunteers would henceforth be recruited annually, and at least 49% of the men who underwent the military's medical examination each year were now to become part of the army (Germany 51%, France 82%). The total service period of 15 years remained unchanged. While the law was expected to have a positive impact on Belgian readiness for war in the long term, reorganising had the opposite short-term effect. The reform was only fully implemented in 1923.[91] The measures came too late for World War I, which would break out only a year after the law's official passage. Moreover, the Balkan wars of 1912/13 and the resulting increase in armament measures in France, Russia and Germany were not taken into account by the new Belgian army reform.[92]

In view of the growing volume of information in the run-up to the First World War, a further intelligence department was set up in the German general staff in November 1910, and at the same time, the responsibility for observing Belgium was transferred from the 3rd to the 9th department. From then on, information on the armies of the Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal and the American states was also being processed here.[93] The general staff had recognised early on that the Moroccan tensions could lead to far-reaching reforms in Belgium. As early as December 1911, Moltke pointed out that the German Empire's intentions were being interpreted as aggressive, and had exercised a stimulating effect on Belgium's military aspirations. It was therefore safe to assume that the Belgian

90 Stevenson, *Battlefield or Barrier?*, *cit*., pp. 490-491.

91 Herre, *Die kleinen Staaten Europas*, *cit*., p. 232 and Stevenson, *Battlefield or Barrier?*, *cit*., p. 493.

92 Stevenson, *Battlefield or Barrier?*, *cit*., p. 474.

93 Stoeckl, „Die Organisation des Großen Generalstabes [1803-1914]", BArch, PH 3/124, fol. 157.

army would soon be strengthened.[94] Renner too reported that the newly published Belgian propaganda on reinforcing the army was "probably the most serious [...] Belgium has ever produced on the topic of military reforms".[95]

Nevertheless, the military attaché did not believe far-reaching measures would be implemented; he considered the political resistance to be too great.[96] Only one year later, however, Renner had to correct himself: Such a remarkable turnaround in Belgian public opinion had been unthinkable a few years ago. The officer cited multiple reasons for this abrupt development, among them

> "war concerns of recent years, the army's fervent propaganda, support on the reform plans from the French and the English, certain measures in our country that suggested an intended march through Belgium (e.g. the development of the railway network along the Belgian border) and careless discussions of such topics by German military writers, the inauguration of a new monarch and, finally: younger, modern personalities that have replaced the old leaders of the clerical party and are convinced of the need for a strong national defence, among them and most important the current Prime Minister, Baron Broqueville."[97]

When news about the extent of the reforms was first leaked, the German general staff were alarmed. They had meticulously planned for every hour of their strategy for a war on two fronts and it could not tolerate any delays. A massive expansion of the Belgian army now shattered the entire proposition. The planned doubling of the armed forces would put Belgium "in a better position than before to resist any possible passage of foreign armies",[98] a memorandum of the 3rd department stressed. At the end of December 1912, Moltke referred to the great sacrifices that Belgium was making for its national defence, in a memorandum of his own. Now Germany, he said, would also have to make sacrifices and strengthen its army.[99] In this way, the Chief of Staff used the Belgian bill as a justification for the expansion of the army that Germany was already planning. In verbal commu-

94 Moltke to Bethmann Hollweg, „Die militär-politische Lage Deutschlands Ende November 1911", 2 December 1911, BArch, PH 3/125, annex 5, p. 14.

95 Renner, Military Report No. 146, 22 December 1911, PA-AA, R 4400.

96 *Ibid*.

97 Renner, Military Report No. 142, 23 October 1912, PA-AA, R 4401.

98 3. Abteilung, „Aufmarsch und operative Absichten der Franzosen in einem zukünftigen deutsch-französischen Kriege", May 1912, rectified 1913/14, BArch, PH 3/256, fol. 14.

99 Moltke to Bethmann Hollweg, „Denkschrift über die militärpolitische Lage", 21 December 1912, in: Reichsarchiv, *Kriegsrüstung und Kriegswirtschaft, Anlagenbd*., *cit*., No. 54, p. 168.

nications with the political leadership and the Prussian ministry of war, he even classified the Belgian reform project as causing a "substantial deterioration of our military situation".[100] However, in talks with Bethmann Hollweg and Wilhelm II, Moltke ruled out an immediate departure from the German war plan: "The reform of the Belgian army would perhaps have to be implemented first. Before that, Belgium would probably be too weak to maintain its neutrality militarily."[101]

Similar concerns were expressed by the 9th department, which was in charge of the observation of Belgium, considered all Belgian measures as "directed against Germany"[102] and classified the year 1913 as "one of the most important in the military history of Belgium".[103] The reform had greatly enhanced the self-confidence of the Belgian army. Progress was evident in almost all areas. In contrast

> "to earlier times, there is much good will. There is reformatory zeal in all military fields. The service is being handled more seriously. Incompetent officers are being dismissed. Equipment and armament are being improved. Fortress construction is being accelerated."[104]

In addition, the administration of the Belgian army was now making an effort to protect the fortresses of Liège from a German *coup de main*. These developments gave rise to the idea that a march through Belgium should better be undertaken sooner rather than later.[105] The general staff considered the fortress of Liège such a crucial piece of the puzzle that it had even planted two under-cover officers to participate in its construction in 1913, so that they could send fresh information to Berlin.[106]

Counterbalancing these fears was the view that it would take time before the effects of the reform would actually be palpable. "Only time will tell whether the

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100 Oral preparation for the „Denkschrift über die militärpolitische Lage", end of 1912, BArch, PH 3/445, annex 7, p. 3.

101 Note by Bethmann Hollweg, 22 December 1912, PA-AA, R 4463.

102 9. Abteilung, „Die Neugestaltung der belgischen Armee", November 1913, BayHStA-KA, Gstb 223, pp. 9-10.

103 9. Abteilung, „Jahresbericht 1913", 1 December 1913, BayHStA-KA, Gstb 576, p. 14.

104 9. Abteilung, „Die Neugestaltung der belgischen Armee", November 1913, BayHStA-KA, Gstb 223, pp. 14-15.

105 MOMBAUER, *Helmuth von Moltke*, *cit*., p. 157.

106 Eugen FISCHER-BALING, «Politische und militärische Führung des ersten Weltkrieges in Deutschland», in BUNDESMINISTERIUM FÜR VERTEIDIGUNG (Ed.), *Schicksalsfragen der Gegenwart - Handbuch politisch-historischer Bildung. Bd. 3: Über das Verhältnis der zivilen und militärischen Gewalt,* Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 1958, pp. 72–94, p. 75.

Belgian army really is making progress through the reform, whether it will become a serious force to be reckoned with for its country's size", was Renner's successor as military attaché Robert von Klüber's take[107] after having met with the Belgian king in May 1914.

> "Anyone who did not experience the 1913 military manoeuvres and did not see the complete inadequacy of the army in the field may be tempted to believe that it will already have had some success. From a purely organisational point of view, the current substantially higher number of recruits already represents a strong increase in strength; [...]. There is also a lot of hard work being done; the officer corps is being rejuvenated and the population is more interested in the army than it was a few years ago. But everything that has happened so far is only planting the seed. The crop needs to grow with the help of extensive and thorough training and sensible tactics that will become part of the troops' and their leaders' flesh and blood and it will only ripen slowly and through unrelenting work."[108]

Klüber's report effectively depicted a steadily closing window of opportunity. The implications of his assessment were that after the Belgian reforms had gained the time to be fully completed, it would be much more difficult for the German army to march through the country quickly and without much resistance. Paradoxically, reforming the Belgian army had not deterred the German general staff from implementing its plan, but instead consolidated it.[109] Apart from the closing window of opportunity, they considered another argument for carrying out a march through Belgium sooner rather than later: The reform had not yet had any positive impact on the troops' training, which was considered to be inadequate. In 1910, 1911 and 1912, no major military manoeuvres had been held, while mutinies in the barracks shed light on the alarming state of discipline in the Belgian army.[110] Consequently, Renner felt the dangers of a large-scale operation through Belgium lay "less in the

107 Klüber had previously gained many years of experience in various general staff positions, including the 9th department. He too was transferred to the Paris post in summer 1914. See Hanns Möller-Witten, *Geschichte der Ritter des Ordens „pour le mérite" im Weltkrieg. Bd. 1*, Bernard & Graefe, Berlin, 1935, pp. 588-590 and Karl-Friedrich Hildebrand, Christian Zweng, *Die Ritter des Ordens Pour le Mérite des I. Weltkriegs, Bd. 2 (H-O). Erstmalig mit Foto, Verleihungsbegründung, Dienstlaufbahn, Beförderungen und verliehenen Orden*, Biblio Verlag, Bissendorf, 2003, pp. 229-230.

108 Klüber, Military Report No. 20, 7 May 1914, BArch, PH 3/126, fol. 4-10.

109 Stevenson, *Battlefield or Barrier?*, *cit*., p. 507.

110 „Bericht über die Tätigkeit des großen Generalstabs, des Landesvermessungswesens und der Kriegsakademie im Jahre 1912", 14 January 1913, BayHSt-KA, Gstb 576, p. 24.

resistance that the Belgian army can muster and more in the difficulties marching and feeding large masses of troops in the land south of the Meuse."[111]

Generalleutnant von Moltke, der neue Chef des Generalstabs, 1906

Faced with dwindling possibilities, Moltke repeatedly sounded out Belgium's position in the event of a Franco-German war. Would the small kingdom really resist the powerful German army? Or would it be content with diplomatic protests? During the Belgian King Albert I's visit to Potsdam in November 1913, Moltke and Wilhelm II blatantly threatened the sovereign, saying that nothing would be able to "resist the *furor teutonicus* once it is unleashed." Belgium and the other small states had "a great advantage should they join us, because the consequences for those who stand against us will be grave."[112] The shocked Belgian king could only tell his German hosts that Belgium would resist any aggressor. But Moltke did not stop at this one attempt to divine the country's true position. In the spring of 1914, for example, he used several occasions to ask the Belgian military attaché in Berlin, Henri de Melotte, how Belgium would behave in the event of a war and how it defined its neutrality, to which Melotte replied firmly that Belgium would defend its neutrality against any aggressor with all its might.[113] In light of these statements, there could no longer be any doubt in the general staff that Belgium would not defend itself militarily against a German advance.[114]

111 Renner, Military Report No. 2, 8 January 1912, PA-AA, R 4462.

112 On Albert I's visit to Potsdam see Jean Stengers, «Guillaume II et le Roi Albert à Potsdam en novembre 1913», *Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres et des Sciences Morales et Politiques*, 4 (1993), pp. 227–253, especially pp. 234-235 and John C. Röhl, *Wilhelm II. Bd. 3: Der Weg in den Abgrund 1900 - 1941*, C.H. Beck, München, 2008, pp. 1040-1041.

113 Herre, *Die kleinen Staaten Europas*, *cit*., p. 238.

114 In a memorandum published the beginning of 1913, Moltke had already stated: "I believe,

Moltke was also concerned about the close ties between some Belgian and French military officers, and asked the German Foreign Office to keep an eye on their exchanges.[115] In May 1914, he instructed Klüber to report to the Belgian king that German military circles expected Belgium to have a hostile attitude in the event of war and destroy railways, for example. Albert I replied that Belgium wanted nothing but to remain independent and that it was committed to protecting its neutrality by force of arms, in accordance with international law and the wording of its treaties. The monarch also confided that he considered the French to be a greater danger to his country at the moment. Klüber's report also included a conversation with Broqueville, whose testimony was further water to the mills of those who wanted the German march through Belgium at all costs. Broqueville is quoted as having said:

> "I firmly believe in Germany's honest feelings towards Belgium. But if I were the Chief of Staff of Germany or even France, and the strategic interest, the good of my country, required it, I would not hesitate for a moment to enter neutral territory and force my way through (*frayer le passage*). This is so natural that if the moment came (*le moment donné*) I would only wonder at anyone choosing to do the opposite."[116]

When the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the Austrian heir to the throne, triggered a serious international crisis, the general staff saw its opportunity to wage the long advocated preventive war against Russia and France. It was not only these two great powers' armaments that prompted Moltke to recommend starting hostilities,[117] but the military measures that had been taken by Belgium too that moved him to pressure Germany's political leadership. The July crisis emphasised the time pressure that German military planners considered themselves to be under. The planned *coup de main* on Liège influenced Moltke's actions greatly during the critical days following Austria's ultimatum to Serbia.[118]

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however, we can rule out the possibility that our diplomacy will succeed in bringing about such an agreement with Belgium from the outset; on the contrary, we can expect Belgium to regard a German advance through its territory as a *casus belli* and immediately take our opponents' side." Memorandum by Moltke, „Verhalten Deutschlands in einem Dreibundkriege", February 1913, in: Hölzle, *Quellen zur Entstehung des Ersten Weltkrieges*, *cit*., pp. 153-159, here pp. 156-157.

115 Moltke to Jagow, 17 October 1913, PA-AA, R 4463.

116 Klüber to Waldersee, 7 May 1914, PA-AA, R 4463.

117 See Grawe, *Deutsche Feindaufklärung vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, *cit*., pp. 365-460.

118 On Moltke's actions in the July crisis see Annika Mombauer, «A reluctant Military Lead-

It would only be successful, he concluded, if Belgium did not take measures to secure the unprotected spaces between the forts. However, German intelligence kept the Chief of Staff constantly informed and it reported the Belgian army was mobilising as early as 29th July and starting to reinforce the forts.[119] In the days that followed, news of the preparations in Liège increased, while the Belgian army also primed railways and tunnels for blasting.[120] This news was the decisive factor that led Moltke to advise Bethmann Hollweg to embark on a "war *sans phrase*".[121]

* * *

Knowledge of Belgium, particularly of the country's geography and its army influenced German war planning and the actions of the German general staff in the run-up to the First World War. Schlieffen had originally decided to bypass the French fortifications via Belgium because he was well informed about the favourable geography, the state of Belgian infrastructure and the clear weaknesses in Belgian national defence. Between 1897 and 1905, the period in which the Schlieffen plan was drawn up, the Belgian army was not considered to be very powerful and seemed hardly capable of defending its country against a German invasion. Considering that the only alternative was to bypass the French fortifications via Switzerland, Schlieffen's choice was easy.

Schlieffen's successor, Moltke, held on to his predecessor's basic ideas, not least because the German military attachés in Brussels repeatedly reported on the Belgian army's numerous shortcomings. A swift march into the French army's flank seemed unlikely to be hindered by the Belgians, especially since the

er? Helmuth von Moltke and the July Crisis of 1914», *War in History*, 6 (1999), pp. 417–446 and MOMBAUER, *Helmuth von Moltke*, *cit*., pp. 182-226.

119 Großer Generalstab, Sektion IV k, „3. Bericht. Nachrichten bis 29. Juli 4 Uhr nachm.", 29 July 1914, BArch, PH 3/53, fol. 3-5. On the activities of the general staff's military intelligence during the July crisis, see Ulrich TRUMPENER, «War Premeditated? German Intelligence Operations in July 1914», *Central European History*, 9 (1976), pp. 58–85 and GRAWE, *Deutsche Feindaufklärung vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, *cit*., pp. 436-460.

120 Großer Generalstab, Sektion IV k, „4. Bericht", 30 July 1914, BArch, PH 3/53, fol. 6-7 and 2. Abteilung, „5. Mitteilung. Nachrichten bis 31. Juli 4 Uhr nachm.", 31 July 1914, ibid., fol. 8.

121 Holger AFFLERBACH, *Falkenhayn. Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich*, Oldenbourg, München, 1994, p. 159.

Belgian fortification system was also considered to be dilapidated and out of date. The shortcomings of the fortresses of Liège even prompted Moltke to change one crucial aspect of the Schlieffen plan: In order not to violate Dutch neutrality, the forts would be captured in a *coup de main*. This not only heightened the time pressure Germany would be under in the event of a war, but also considerably narrowed the scope of action available to the country's political leadership.

The general staff observed Belgium's post-1909 military reforms with great interest, as they directly affected Germany's war plans. While the 1909 measures were hardly perceived as a threat, the 1913 law alarmed the German general staff and upset its entire strategy. Once the new reforms would be implemented, a swift march through Belgium – the condition *sine qua non* for a quick victory against France – seemed almost impossible. Until then, however, the general staff had a window of opportunity in which an advance through Belgium still promised to be successful. In July 1914, Moltke seized the first chance to make use of this narrow time frame and urged Germany's political leadership to start the long advocated war. The Belgian reforms thus induced the exact opposite of their intended effect: instead of preventing Germany from attacking the neutral kingdom, they brought forward its plan to mobilize a massive army and march through Belgium, driven by the military imperatives that suggested the sooner the better.[122]

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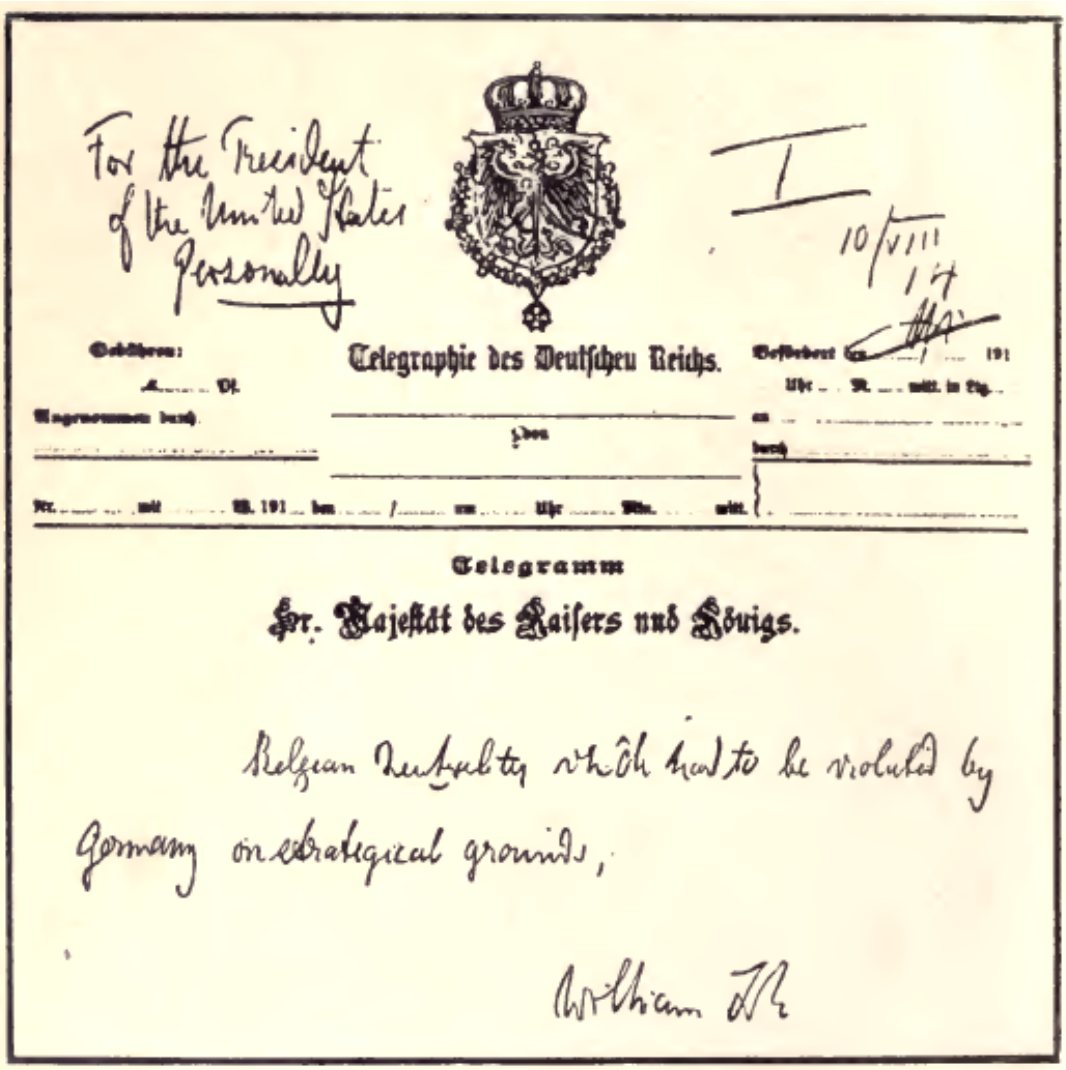
122 A similar conclusion is reached by Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, *cit*., p. 162.


For the President
of the United States
Personally

I

10/VIII
14

Telegraphie des Deutschen Reichs.

Telegramm

Sr. Majestät des Kaisers und Königs.

Belgian Neutrality which had to be violated by
Germany on strategical grounds,

William I R

FACSIMILE EXTRACT

FROM

MESSAGE WRITTEN BY THE KAISER

TO PRESIDENT WILSON

ON AUG. 10TH 1914

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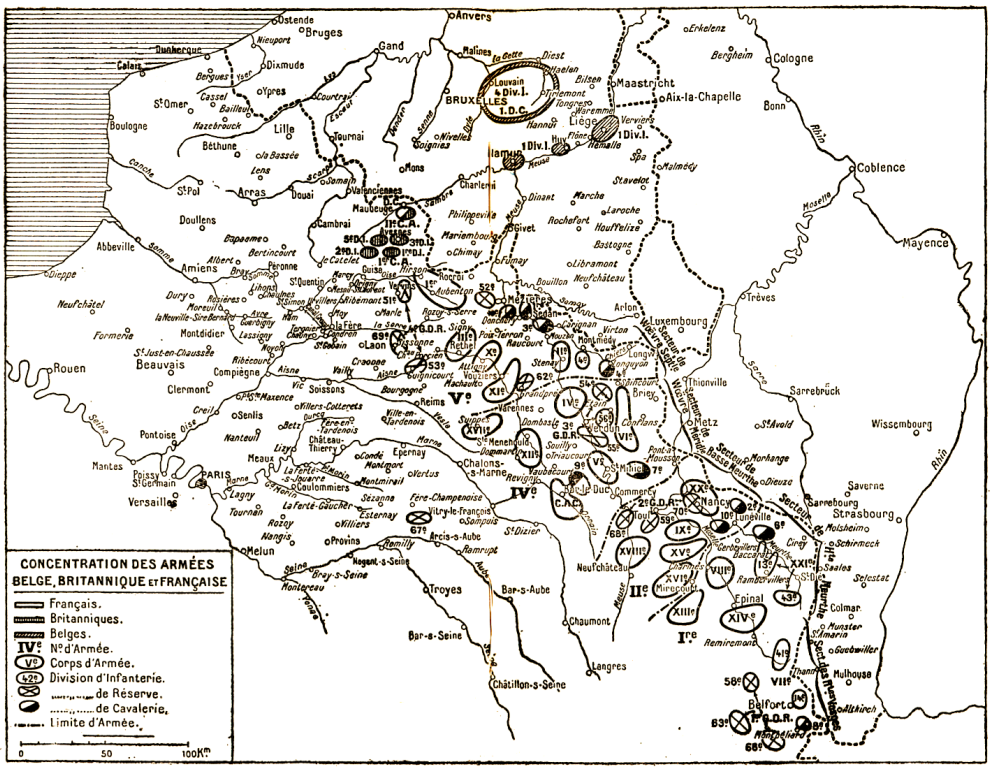

Lieutenant A. FROMENT

L'ESPIONNAGE Militaire

LES FONDS SECRETS DE LA GUERRE ET LE SERVICE DES RENSEIGNEMENTS EN FRANCE ET A L'ÉTRANGER

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