

German Intelligence and Counterintelligence in Belgium in the 20th Century

An introduction

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At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Germany was one of Belgium's main trading partners and the object of a certain admiration in Belgium itself, but relations between the two countries collapsed following the violation of Belgian neutrality by the German army on the 4th of August 1914. The two successive wars and their multiple consequences (destructions, exactions, military occupations, post-war occupations, etc.) put a heavy strain on the relations between the two neighbouring countries for decades. The construction of Europe and the Atlantic alliance then allowed a rapprochement between the two countries, not through a privileged relationship as between France and the Federal Republic of Germany since the Elysée Treaty (1963), but as partners sharing close interests in a common multilateral framework. The success of this renewed relationship should not hide the fact that for many Belgians, hostility, resentment or at least mistrust have long continued to dominate their feelings towards Germany.

Belgian historiography, especially when it comes to the study of wars, has for a long time considered Germany as the Other of whom one was the victim. Even if it was not absolute, this perspective, willingly or not stamped by national identity, slowed down the development of a real transnational historiography about the conflictual relations between the two countries. The relative indifference of German historiography towards Belgium, which is more attentive to its larger neighbours, has certainly not helped to reverse this trend. Historical research, however, has everything to gain from an approach, at the confluence of the historiographies and sources of the two countries concerned by the phenomena under study. Intelligence and, more generally, secret activities, whether they are considered from an offensive or defensive angle, are certainly no exception. It

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is in this perspective that the present issue of the *Cahiers Inlichtingenstudies – Cahiers d'Etudes du Renseignement* takes on the activities of the German services on Belgian territory throughout the 'Short Twentieth Century' (Hobsbawm, 1994), a period running from 1914 to 1991 characterised by geopolitical and ideological confrontations that tore the world and Europe apart.

The confrontation between the two countries in this field was never so tense as at the time of the two military occupations of Belgium by Germany, between 1914 and 1918, and then between 1940 and 1944, during which the mighty occupying power developed an intense counter-intelligence activity on the territory under its control. These two occupation periods therefore constitute two central elements of attention for the historiography of German intelligence in Belgium. Until now, this research has been mainly carried out on the Belgian side and has been strongly focused on the Second World War, and more particularly on the role of the *Sicherheitspolizei und der Sicherheitsdienst der SS* (Sipo-SD) (e.g. Van Eetvelde, 2004; Préaux, 2007; Majerus, 2013) and to a lesser extent of the *Abwehr* (Verhoeyen, 2011). Two recent doctoral theses, however, have led to a considerable advance in the knowledge of the German police in Belgium during the First World War (Rezsöhazi, 2020) and of the repression of German intelligence and counter-intelligence agents by Belgian courts during and after this war (Vanheule, 2021).

Occupation will be defined here as temporary military rule during or as a consequence of a war. It starts with the occupier's declaration of war or by actual rule. It aims at keeping up everyday life and public order in the military *hinterlands* and at the economic exploitation of the occupied territory for the purpose of prevailing in the war. Occupation may also serve as a bargaining chip in negotiations or as a preliminary stage for an annexation (Kronenbitter, Pöhlmann & Walter, 2006).

The military's qualification for this kind of administrative takeover is ambivalent. On the one hand, as a bureaucratic organization, the military is able to manage large numbers of people, on the other hand, soldiers are not necessarily trained in non-military tasks like administration, law enforcement, jurisdiction, economy, or media. The attitude of the occupied toward the occupiers is multifaceted, with 'resistance' and 'collaboration' being only two attitudes in a much wider spectrum (Hirschfeld, 1984). Occupation is an international and transnational phenomenon that underwent a considerable juridification since the late 19th century.

An essential aspect of occupation is securing this rule against espionage. For most of the period under consideration, the German parlance for this task called counterintelligence was *Spionageabwehr* or simply *Abwehr*, the latter literally translated as 'defense'. The linguistic comparison reveals a peculiar passive notion of the German term compared to the more active notion of the English term 'counterintelligence'. It might therefore make sense to start with a practical definition that is not necessarily contemporary but nonetheless established. The parlance of one of today's biggest International Organizations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), serves this purpose well. Its *Glossary of Terms and Definitions* defines counterintelligence as "those activities concerned with identifying and counteracting the threat to security posed by hostile intelligence services or organizations or by individuals engaged in espionage, sabotage, subversion or terrorism" (AAP-06, 2020, p. 34).

A logical premise for any definition of counterintelligence is the existence of intelligence as an element of military doctrine and a component of the military organization. This is self-evident for both the Second World War and the Cold War era. However, in 1914 intelligence had been organizationally founded in most European armed forces but had been untested in a major European war so far. The NATO definition also suits well as it hints to the passive and active forms of action with regard to counterintelligence ('identifying and counteracting'). It also mentions the multi-faceted forms of threats ('espionage, sabotage, subversion or terrorism'). Military counterintelligence is a security practice that, from the very beginning, has drawn heavily on the expertise of non-military disciplines in administration, science and technology – starting with index cards (the notorious French *fiches*), dactyloscopy, photography, chemistry, sniffer dogs, eaves dropping, cryptoanalysis, communications control, and above all social competences like foreign languages or cultural mimicry.

For a historical analysis, it is important to understand that from its very beginning there were legal boundaries for intelligence and counterintelligence. On the international level, it was The Hague *Convention on Laws and Customs on War on Land* of 1899/1907. On the national level, most European states had established some form of espionage legislation between 1886 and 1914 (Arboit, 2014, p. 78; Schmidt, 2006, p. 237; Thomas, 1991, p. 3), even though in Belgium, this legislation was essentially adopted at a very late moment, i.e. on the very first day of the German invasion (Vanheule, 2021). Consequently, counterintelligence can be interpreted as a military or law enforcement activity that aims at controlling an adversary state's activity that, in turn, might appear morally questionable, but acceptable from a national-politico point of view. Important here is that espionage on the national territory was illegal according to national law, but an established practice in the international realm. This rather legalistic interpretation can serve to highlight a basic conflict when this topic is approached historically.

Furthermore, we should be aware that the dominant object of counterintelligence – espionage on behalf of a foreign power – was not necessarily a political act, but could also be a way of material subsistence. Particularly under the difficult conditions of the war, some people became involved in spying (and counter-spying) simply because they could earn some money. Conversely, this means that counterintelligence also was part of a big business. This business was about trading information.

Historically, counterintelligence is an exceptional state activity. In fact, it is a specific form of surveillance. Surveillance does not equate with repression (Reichardt, 2016). Instead, it is rather an element within a much broader and increasing monitoring activity on behalf of the state since the late 19th century. In one of the primers of Surveillance Studies, Edward Higgs defines surveillance as "that generalized and structured collection of information which is so typical for modern administration – the creation of routine administrative records, and of databases, paper and electronic, rather than the ad hoc activities of informers and 'spooks'" (Higgs, 2004). So, when assessing counterintelligence for the case of Belgium during the 20th century, one has to recognize this bigger picture and be aware of the potentially catalyst effect of the two World Wars in this universal rise of the information state, as Alexandre Rios-Bordes has recently shown in the American case (Rios-Bordes, 2018).

One of the main purposes of this special issue is also to contribute to identifying the place of counterintelligence within the framework of European occupation in the 20th century. Counterintelligence is a new and promising field of research because it is situated at the fringes of military history, security studies, and the cultural history of war. It encompasses the fields of external and domestic security, which usually are dealt with separately in the historiography. In the realms of occupation and counterintelligence, national, legal, or moral boundaries are mostly blurred and therefore an attractive challenge for the historian.

Given the Belgian experience, this country can serve as a particularly interesting case study. The Belgian experience in two world wars is not unique, but nonetheless special. Unlike other states that experienced German occupation in the 20th century – France or Russia/Soviet Union could be named here – Belgium was a small and neutral state. From the beginning, this resulted in a different power relation and a particular victim narrative. Furthermore, the country's ethnic structure made it vulnerable to the occupiers' attempt to exploit this by introducing dividing nationality policies. Like in most other European countries, the practice of German occupation during the Second World War was closely linked to the Shoah. This also touches upon the question of counterintelligence because its organization became increasingly involved in the relentless pursuing of the Jewish population. Apart from this unique aspect, the German occupations of 1914-18 and 1940-44 offered many *déjà vu*-effects for those who lived through both periods and for those who study the topic with an academic interest. The Belgian experience also invites to comparison with the neighboring (Northern) France.

Markus Pöhlmann addresses the issues of counter-intelligence practice in occupied countries in the first article of this issue. This article goes beyond the framework of Belgium to consider the organisation and methods adopted by German counter-espionage during the First World War in the rear of the various theatres of operation. A task of such magnitude in the context of a long occupation war had never been envisaged and even less prepared by German decision-makers.

In the second article, Elise Rezsöhazi refocuses on Belgium and northern France to show how the situation of military occupation led to a diversification of the tasks of the German secret police. For the *Geheime Feldpolizei*, conceived before the war for the German army, as well as for the *Zentralpolizeistelle*, set up by the German government-general in Brussels, counter-intelligence was only one aspect among others of their mission to protect the army and German interests. The third contribution, by Emmanuel Debruyne, shows us that these police forces were secret through their mode of action and the threats they were fighting, but that their existence was known to those who were the object of their surveillance: the occupied people. The feeling of living under a police state fed the anxiety and sometimes the fear of the occupied civilians, but also their resentment towards the occupiers, and particularly towards these policemen who developed a bad reputation.

If violence was not absent from police intelligence during the first occupation (Debruyne, Rezsöhazi & van Ypersele, 2018), it was deployed on a much larger scale when Belgium fell under Nazi domination, as the three articles about the second occupation show in their own way. Recreated by the Nazi regime a few years before the war but less known than the *Gestapo*, the *Geheime Feldpolizei*, is at the heart of the articles by Louis

Fortemps and Vincent Gabriel. Fortemps focuses on the GFP 530, based in Brussels, and underlines the importance in its counter-intelligence activities of its subordinate units, the commissariats, which were assigned cases but had a great deal of autonomy in the way they handled them. Gabriel also looks at the practices of the GFP, particularly the use of violence. Through the case of the GFP 648 in Liège, he shows that violence was deeply rooted in its practices and was above all an instrument for acquiring police intelligence.

Liège is also considered, together with Antwerp, by Robby Van Eetvelde, to understand who were the members of the ‘*Gestapo*’, i.e. of the *Sipo-SD*, in Belgium. Combining a highly politicised leadership with a more experienced police base, the *Sipo-SD* managed to gain great efficiency by adapting locally and integrating local collaborators, forming with them a ‘community of violence’ on the fringes of Belgian society.

Although this double experience of military occupations is unavoidable, it does not in itself sum up the activities of the German services on Belgian territory. The article by Florian Altenhöner and Etienne Verhoeyen shows that as early as the 1930s, the German military intelligence apparatus carried out operations to prepare for future military operations against Belgium and on its soil. Although Nazi Germany’s spies did not play a decisive role, they nevertheless contributed to a vast mosaic of information that made the decisive military operation of May 1940 possible.

This strategic interest in Belgium also arose in a radically different context, that of the Cold War, which saw East German intelligence focus on the country. Marie Bouvry’s article gives an overview of the espionage methods used by the *Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung* (HVA), the foreign intelligence department of the all-powerful Stasi, notably for the recruitment by ‘Romeo’ agents of women working as secretaries at NATO headquarters. While these contributions are intended to be an important advance in the field, they are far from exhausting in the cross-fertilized history of intelligence between Belgium and Germany, which offers many other research perspectives. For example, the reversal of roles with the occupation of part of the Rhineland by Belgian forces after each of the two world wars raises many questions in terms of intelligence, for example on the role played by the *Sûreté militaire de l’Armée d’Occupation* (SMAO) after the First World War (Dejonckheere, 2015). Similarly, Germany and Belgium were not only adversaries, but also partners. Police cooperation in the fight against communism during the interwar period was one dimension of this partnership (Verhoeyen & Van Doorslaer, 1986), but everything remains to be said for the Cold War period and the years that separate us from it, for example, about the exchanges between the *Bundesnachrichtendienst* (BND) and the Belgian services, whether in a bilateral or multilateral framework, and this as much in the field of Soviet espionage as in the fight against terrorism, or even in peacekeeping operations.

By its very nature, the history of intelligence and counter-intelligence has much to gain from crossing sources, approaches and historiographies, and from adopting transnational frameworks. It can even be an invitation to rediscover whole sections of national history in a connected perspective, insofar as this connection can also be that of relationships of adversity, including in their most hidden manifestations.

The idea for this thematic issue goes back to a workshop that the editors held in Potsdam in 2019. The event was possible at the time due to the support of the *Arbeitskreis Militärgeschichte* e.V., the *Laboratoire de Recherche Historique* (LaRHis, *Université Catholique de Louvain*) and the University of Potsdam (Chair of Prof. Dr. Sönke Neitzel). Following the workshop, additional relevant contributions were solicited for the thematic issue. The editors would like to thank the partners of the workshop and the editors of the *Cahiers Inlichtingenstudies – Cahiers d'Etudes du Renseignement*.

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