Feeding the Crocodile: Was Leopold Guilty?

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Following correspondence with Daniel Wybo of London, Ontario, Finest Hour *wishes to set out what we know of King Leopold III of the Belgians, and Churchill's remarks about the Belgian surrender on 28 May 1940. Mr. Wybo's interest is through the memory of his father, who fought in the Battle to defend the canal at Ghent-Terneuzen in the area of Terdonk. Taken prisoner by the Germans, the elder Wybo escaped and later became part of the Belgian underground. "My father was always bitter about how our King was treated," Mr. Wybo writes, "and over the great lies propagated about his actions." Reprinted material by kind permission of Winston S. Churchill and Curtis Brown Ltd., Andrew Roberts and David Reynolds. Our thanks to Lt. Col. Louis Van Leemput, Warren Kimball, Daniel Wybo, Paul Courtenay and James Lancaster for assistance in research.*

1. The Controversy

Leopold III (1901-83) was King of the Belgians from 1934 through 1951. Born in Brussels, the son of Albert I, he married Princess Astrid of Sweden in 1926. The Queen died in a car accident in 1935, and in 1941 Leopold married morganatically a commoner, Lillian Baels—which was criticized by many Belgians during and after World War II.

Belgium, a well-armed neutral, was invaded without warning by Hitler on 10 May 1940. The Belgians appealed for help, and Anglo-French forces took up defensive positions along the Dyle River, while the Belgian Army held the Albert Canal line to the northeast. German glider troops captured the key fortress at Eben-Emael, forcing the Belgians to fall back to the Dyle before the French could set up their positions. The resulting battle found the French still in possession of the field, but with an irreplaceable loss of 105 tanks.

A broader crisis was developing meanwhile at Sedan, where on 14 May German Panzers broke the French line, crossing the River Meuse. Allied forces in Belgium were ordered to withdraw, and within a week , the French Army of the North, the entire British Expeditionary Force, and the Belgian Army were encircled. On the 25th the Belgian government fled to France, but the Belgian Army kept fighting until the 28th, providing extra time and protection to the withdrawing Allies. Leopold remained to face the Germans. Refusing to administer his country in accord with their demands, he was imprisoned in his palace at Laeken until 1944.

Leopold's surrender was vilified by French Prime Minister Paul Reynaud, and, more importantly, his own exiled government in unoccupied France. Lloyd George, no paragon of patriotic virtue himself in 1940, wrote on 2 June: "You can rummage in vain through the black annals of the most reprobate Kings of the earth to find a blacker and more squalid sample of perfidy and poltroonery than that perpetuated by the King of the Belgians."[1]

In November 1940, in a move that would make him more unpopular when it came out after the war, Leopold visited Hitler in Berchtesgaden. He had gone to plead for release of prisoners and improved food supplies. Hitler released Flemish-speaking prisoners and allowed a Flemish parliament to be set up, but he would not release French-speaking Belgians, and food remained low.

Leopold continued to feud with his government-in-exile, which in late October arrived in London. In January 1944 he wrote a "political testament" to be published if he were not in Belgium when it was liberated. Herein he declared that all international agreements of his exiled government (including an important one granting the Allies access to uranium in the Belgian Congo) were invalid because they did not have the Royal signature. He lived in exile in Austria after the war, refusing to withdraw his criti-

May 1940: German troops invade Belgium, which put up a stiff resistance.

cisms of the wartime government. After a 1950 "people's consultation" on his return, in which 72 percent of Flemish-speakers voted in favor and 58 percent of French-speakers against, Leopold was returned briefly to the throne. But continued controversy, including three days of riots and two deaths in Liège, caused him to abdicate in favor of his son, Baudouin, the following year. He has remained a controversial figure to this day.

Churchill's comments in the Commons about King Leopold's surrender, though not as censorious as those of Reynaud or Lloyd George, were certainly significant:

> I have no intention of suggesting to the House [WSC said in the Commons] "that we should attempt at this moment to pass judgment upon the action of the King of the Belgians in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief of the Belgian Army. This army has fought very bravely and has both suffered and inflicted heavy losses. The Belgian Government has dissociated itself from the action of the King, and, declaring itself to be the only legal Government of Belgium, has formally announced its resolve to continue the war at the side of the Allies.[3]

He wrote in rather milder terms in the second volume of his postwar memoirs:

> Upon all this there now descended a simplifying catastrophe. The Germans, who had hitherto not pressed the Belgian front severely, on May 24 broke the Belgian line on either side of Courtrai, which is but thirty miles from Ostend and Dunkirk. The King of the Belgians soon considered the situation hopeless, and prepared himself for capitulation. [2]

Churchill was being inordinately kind to the exiled Belgian government, which he said was resolved to continue the war in exile. In mid-June, Prime Minister Hubert Pierlot and Foreign Minister Paul-Henri Spaak (a postwar secretary-general of NATO and founder of what became the EU) proposed, if Leopold would agree, to sign an armistice with Hitler—which conveniently might have allowed them to return to Brussels (as Nazi puppets). Spaak later admitted that, by refusing his support, Leopold had prevented him and his colleagues from becoming collaborators.

There is no doubt that, at the time, Spaak and Pierlot considered the war to be lost; and they did not even accompany their government when left France and established itself in London by October 1940.[4]

Churchill's relatively equable handling of the subject in June 1940 was too much for the excitable Reynaud, who complained bitterly that Leopold had let down the Franco-British armies. Churchill thus added in his book:

> Concern was expressed by the French Government that my reference to King Leopold's action was in sharp contrast to that of M. Reynaud. I thought it my duty, when speaking in the House on June 4, after a careful examination of the fuller facts then available, and in justice not only to our French Ally but also to the Belgian Government now in London, to state the truth in plain terms:
>
> "At the last moment, when Belgium was already invaded, King Leopold called upon us to come to his aid, and even at the last moment we came. He and his brave, efficient Army, nearly half a million strong, guarded our left flank and thus kept open our only line of retreat to the sea. Suddenly, without prior consultation, with the least possible notice, without the advice of his Ministers and upon his own personal act, he sent a plenipotentiary to the German Command, surrendered his Army, and exposed our whole flank and means of retreat.
>
> "The brave and efficient army of which I spoke had indeed conducted itself in accordance with its best traditions. They were overcome by an enemy whom it was beyond their power to resist for long. That they were defeated and ordered to surrender is no slur upon their honour or reputation." [5]

2. What Really Happened?

While much has been written on the Leopold matter, there are several recent and rather revealing accounts, the first of which was written by the historian Andrew Roberts about the political aspects of the debate: >>

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It is indicative of the changing nature of the King's [George VI's] relationship with Churchill that he did not protest against what he knew to be an undeserved slur on King Leopold III of the Belgians by the Prime Minister. Leopold had written to George VI on 25 May warning him of his country's imminent surrender, a fact proven by the King's answering telegram to Brussels the next day urging him not to become a prisoner. The King therefore knew that Churchill was guilty of a particularly gross "terminological inexactitude" for his depiction of the Belgian capitulation three days later as a treacherous surprise. On the day of his return from the Continent, Britain's special envoy to Leopold, Admiral Roger Keyes, was visited by an Intelligence officer, who demanded all the documents from his mission. Keyes successfully concealed them and showed them to the King to disprove Churchill's calumnies.

Thus the King knew the truth, as did Churchill. Seven months later, sitting in an air raid shelter with Roosevelt's adviser, Harry Hopkins, he "expressed a good deal of sympathy with King Leopold," and although he refused to allow his brother monarch to be stripped of his colonelcy in the British army, or have his Garter banner removed from St George's Chapel, George VI did not, as Leopold had hoped, "insist that his Prime Minister should uphold, rather than pervert, the truth concerning these circumstances." Admiral Keyes's son has since stated: "Had the existence of Leopold's warning letter to George VI, or even a paraphrase of its contents been made public...the French, Belgian and British Prime Ministers' false allegations would have been completely demolished."

Whilst it might be understandable for raisons d'état for the King to have kept silent in the summer of 1940 when Britain desperately needed a scapegoat to explain the Allied defeat, the King permitted this unwarranted slur to continue after the war, even to the extent of Leopold not being invited to Princess Elizabeth's wedding in 1947. To Harry Hopkins the King had confided the view that the Belgian Monarch "should have left the country and established his government elsewhere." Yet this was precisely the course that the British royal family has constantly been given credit for having refused to contemplate in their own case. [6]

George VI wasn't the only person Leopold had warned, according to a contemporary account in *Time*:

On May 20 the Belgian King sent word to the Allies through Sir Roger Keyes that should his troops lose contact with the French and British, "capitulation would be inevitable"....[Roger Keyes] wrote nothing, merely asked the British public to suspend its judgment until all the facts were known. For this he was attacked by the *Daily Mirror* and he sued the paper for libel. Last week, in getting an apology in court, he made the facts public at last. On 27 May, the day before he surrendered, Leopold had asked Keyes "to inform the British authorities that he would be obliged to surrender before a debacle took place. A similar message was given the French." [7]

3. Publishing Repercussions

For the history of Churchill's Leopold account in his memoirs, the most important and scholarly sourcework is David Reynolds' *In Command of History* (now available in paperback from Basic Books via Amazon.com and others):

For Churchill's publishers *Their Finest Hour* proved no less of a challenge than *The Gathering Storm.* They faced the same impossible deadlines, constant changes and autocratic demands. Reviews were also beginning to set in a mould—many being panegyrics rather than analyses. The big exception was for the French edition, significantly re-titled *L'Heure Tragique*, because in France and Belgium 1940 was a national disaster and a running sore in postwar politics. As before, reception depended on audience as much as intention.

The British had been vilified by many on the continent for deserting their allies. Churchill therefore took pains to show they did their utmost in a situation that was already hopeless—emphasizing that the British Expeditionary Force was ready to counter-attack at Arras on 21-22 May 1940 but insisting that it also had to protect its line of retreat to the sea. He deflected attention onto the precipitate Belgian surrender, quoting his speech to the Commons on 4 June 1940 which followed Paul Reynaud, the French Prime Minister, in placing the blame squarely on King Leopold: "Suddenly, without prior consultation, with the least possible notice, without the advice of his Ministers and upon his own personal act, he sent a plenipotentiary to the German Command, surrendered his Army and exposed our whole flank and means of retreat."

As he completed *Their Finest Hour,* Churchill found these words coming back to haunt him. The stigma of surrender had marked Leopold ever since May 1940. Unlike the Dutch, Danish and Norwegian monarchs, he stayed with his troops rather than joining the government-in-exile in London, and was taken to Germany when the Allies liberated Belgium. His brother acted as Regent and Left-wing parties campaigned to block his return. The "Royal Question" became the most vexed issue in Belgian politics and much of the debate revolved around interpretations of May 1940. In mid-January 1949, three weeks before serialization began, *La Libre Belgique*, an ultramonarchist paper, printed six front-page articles quoting and rebutting statements critical of the King by Churchill, Reynaud and others. Hurriedly General Pownall [WSC's literary adviser on military

aspects] and Churchill checked their final draft of "The March to the Sea." On the German breach of the Belgian line on 24 May they had written: "The King of the Belgians considered the situation hopeless, and already thought only of capitulation." This was amended to "soon considered the situation hopeless, and prepared himself for capitulation." Churchill had also made reference to Reynaud's denunciation of King Leopold's "treachery." After hurried research [literary assistant Bill] Deakin advised him that Reynaud had never used the word "treachery"—this was an old Vichy canard. The offending sentences were removed, as was the phrase "this pitiful episode" from the speech of 4 June 1940. These and other last-minute revisions, resulting in six new pages of proofs, were all incorporated in the final text.

Nevertheless, when the serial version appeared Churchill was attacked for his 4 June 1940 comment about the King surrendering his army without prior consultation. Sixty-eight Belgian generals published a petition in February 1949 calling his remarks "neither accurate nor fair." After consulting the Prince Regent [Leopold's younger brother Charles, Count of Flanders], who believed no amendments were necessary, Churchill stuck to his guns. "I am not attempting to write a History of the Second World War," he told one critic, "but only [to] give the story of events as they appeared to me and the British Government." Receiving no response, the petitioners took advantage of Churchill's visit to Brussels at the end of May to reissue their declaration, to which another twenty-two generals had added their names. Deakin warned that the document was "a manifesto destined for internal Belgian consumption" and that its probable intent was to "lure you into controversy round the position of the King." Following the Belgian elections in June 1949, a new coalition instituted a referendum on Leopold's return. As far as Churchill was concerned, the fuss then died down except for one fervent British partisan of Leopold, Olive Muir, who harangued him in letters and at public meetings about why he had not replied to the generals. [8]

The Belgians, Churchill wrote, "fought with gallantry and determination" but "were put into the war so late that they could not even occupy their own prepared front lines." By now Leopold was back on the throne and his secretary wrote to Churchill expressing the King's "profound astonishment" at an attack on "the honour of Belgium" and what amounted to a charge of "criminal negligence" by Leopold as commander-in-chief. "Churchill, Pownall and [literary agent] Emery Reves all agreed that silence was again the best course, and the Belgian material was omitted when the statement finally appeared [in the] preface to the second French edition."[9]

4. Was Leopold Guilty?

A canard Churchill once repeated is that "wherever there are three Jews it will be found that there are two Prime Ministers and one leader of the Opposition."[10] This is nothing when it comes to Flemish- and French-speaking Belgians. Belgium is a "manufactured country," and disagreements have long existed between its two populations. No one opinion is likely to satisfy both sides.

In 1936, as Hitler, unopposed, reoccupied the Rhineland, the Belgian government adopted "independence" (armed neutrality), refusing to ally itself with France and Britain while arming Belgium for any future conflict, remembering how their country had been trampled in 1914. As a result, Belgium was one of the better-prepared nations when Hitler marched west in 1940.

Although Belgium did share military information with the Allies, as a proclaimed neutral she could not allow Allied forces to pre-position themselves or march with Belgian forces until she was actually invaded. Oliver Harvey, British Minister in Paris, wrote in his diary in January 1940:

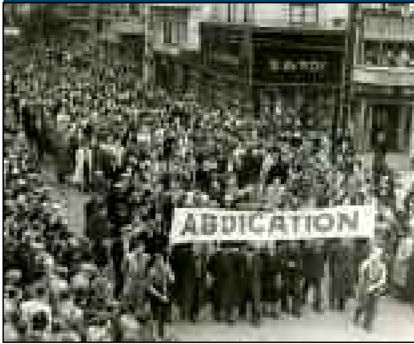
> Poor Leopold is in a desperate dilemma. If he commits himself to a military agreement, the Germans will say he has violated his neutrality and so justify a German invasion. If he doesn't get agreement with us and France we cannot afford him proper help if he is attacked—a vicious circle. Moreover, it can be represented as an Allied interest that Germany should not invade Belgium and therefore Belgium should not provoke Germany. The answer is, I suppose, that Germany will invade Belgium if it suits, whatever Belgium does. [11]

Winston Churchill took a dim view of neutrals. For him there were only two options in the face of Hitler: fight or surrender. Each neutral, WSC said on 20 January 1940, "hopes that if he feeds the crocodile enough, the crocodile will eat him last. All of them hope that the storm will pass before their turn comes to be devoured. But I fear—I fear greatly—the storm will not pass."[12]

But Leopold's stance was based not on Churchill but on the governments that ruled France, Britain and Belgium in the 1930s, which had resolutely refused to oppose Germany's numerous aggressions. Against that kind of leadership, however forlorn the hope that Hitler would leave Belgium alone, as commander of the Belgian forces, Leopold had few alternatives.

When Hitler attacked in May 1940, Holland went down in four days, but Belgium fought bravely for two weeks, its artillery taking a deadly toll on the invaders. Prolonged resistance contributed to the successful evacuation at >>

1950: Anti-Leopold demonstrators.



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Dunkirk, where 340,000 French and British soldiers were rescued. Nearly all the French soldiers refused to join Free French forces in Britain and returned to France. The Belgian government, safe in exile in unoccupied France, forbade Belgian soldiers to leave, and even court-marshalled Belgian pilots who had flown to Britain or North Africa, accusing them of having stolen their aircraft![13]

Leopold had little joy from some of his allies. When General Gort, commander of the British Expeditionary Force, pulled back from the coast to protect access to Dunkirk (leaving the Belgian right flank unprotected) he did not tell the Belgians, nor indeed his own government, until after the fact. Meanwhile General Pownall, commander of British forces in Belgium (the same Pownall who would later assist Churchill in writing his war memoirs) remarked at the time: "we don't give a bugger what happens to the Belgians."[14]

Clearly, the idea that Leopold surrendered without prior warning is denied by the facts. Leopold did not communicate with his own government, which, as he saw it, had cut and run; but he certainly warned George VI and Admiral Keyes. On 27 May he informed General Crampon (French Military Attaché) and Colonel Davy (British Military Mission), who in turn informed General Percival at the War Office. Upon returning to London the next day, Keyes sought an interview with Churchill, who would not see him and forbade him to make any public statements on the situation. But Churchill had additional considerations.

Churchill's position as Prime Minister was by no means solid. On 28 May, the same day the Belgian Army surrendered, Lord Halifax was arguing that the British cabinet should ascertain through Mussolini the German terms for an armistice. The pressure on Churchill was enormous, not least from his now nearly hysterical ally Reynaud; he desperately wanted to keep France in the war, if only as another government-in-exile.

With these points in mind one may dispute Andrew Roberts' suggestion that Churchill said what he did because Britain needed a scapegoat. Often a scapegoat himself, WSC rarely pilloried individuals for catastrophe, and told his country the full nature of this one. The suggestion that George VI expected Leopold to reign in exile, while he himself never intended to do so, is irrelevant because Britain was never occupied; for George VI, the decision to leave never arose.

Churchill's effort to keep France in the war failed, but he kept Britain fighting, and eventually garnered an alliance that won it all back, Belgium included. Churchill's postwar writings were markedly milder than his speeches in 1940. He consulted with Leopold's brother, whose relationship with the King had turned sour and who assured Churchill that no further amendments were necessary. Churchill's memoirs proved insufficient to satisfy all of Leopold's supporters, but realpolitik also was at play here: Churchill saw no benefit in sticking his finger in the collective French eye over a very sore subject in postwar France.

Much of the criticism of Leopold arose from internal Belgian politics. He was hardly the only one who underestimated Hitler's ruthlessness. In 1940, as Oliver Harvey suggested, he was damned if he did and damned if he didn't. That he went to see Hitler is not criminal; he wished to reduce the suffering of his people. On the weight of the evidence it is fair to record that King Leopold III was an honorable man.

ENDNOTES

1. Jackson, Julian, *The Fall of France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), paperback edition, 93-94.

2. Churchill, Winston S., *Their Finest Hour* (London: Cassell, 1949), 83-84.

3. Ibid., 73-74.

4. John Cairns, letter to the editor, *The Independent*, London, 10 January 1996.

5. Churchill, op. cit., 84.

6. Roberts, Andrew, *Eminent Churchillians* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994), 42; the quotes are from Keyes, Roger [son of Admiral Keyes], *Outrageous Fortune: The Tragedy of King Leopold of the Belgians 1901-1941* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984), 308-10, 396.

7. *Time*, 23 January 1941. See: http://xrl.us/bfn99.

8. Reynolds, David, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London: Allen, 2006), 204-05.

9. Ibid., 207-08.

10. Churchill, Winston S., *Closing the Ring* (London: Cassell, 1951), 470.

11. Jackson, op. cit., 76.

12. Churchill, Winston S., *Blood Sweat and Tears* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1941), 252. Speech of 20 January 1940.

13. Lt. Col. Louis Van Leemput, Belgian Air Force (ret.) to Daniel Wybo and the author; Col. Van Leemput, who was 13 at the outbreak of war in 1940, is National Chairman of the Royal League of Veterans of King Leopold III.

14. Jackson, op. cit., 93.