

Michael Auwers, *The Failed Coup of Belgian Diplomacy. Diplomats and Foreign Policy Making in the First World War*. Studies in Belgian History 12 (Brussels: State Archives, 2022, 228 pp., ISBN 9789463912938).

Michael Auwers is currently coordinator of the ‘Cold War’ research unit at CegeSoma in Brussels, a centre specialising in the relationship between conflict and society in the twentieth century. In 2014, he obtained his PhD at the University of Antwerp with a thesis on the transformations of the Belgian diplomatic corps facing democratisation changes between the 1880s and 1930s. The book here reviewed is the publication of a part of this thesis, devoted to the role and habitus of the Belgian diplomat(s) during the First World War. However, the subject is in fact broader since this conflict, which represents a major turning point for Belgium in all aspects, is placed in a context of the period 1895-1914 and the post-war reshaping, by questioning in particular the concept of neutrality (should Belgium trade, after 1914, its imposed neutrality for a voluntary one or not?).

Based on a critical re-reading of Belgian and foreign historical works, some of which rather old, that have examined Belgian foreign policy and its protagonists during the period under consideration (Coolsaet, De Waele, Dumoulin, Haag, Marks, Palo, Devleeshouwer, et cetera), Auwers develops a real personal and refreshing thesis in the sense that he intends to challenge the ‘dominant narrative’. In his view, this narrative overestimates the role of politicians in foreign policy decision-making, while downplaying the role of diplomats. The aim of the book is therefore to reassess the actions and means of action of the different actors, such as politicians, the king, diplomats, and journalists. The author pays particular attention to diplomats as a social group, which he nevertheless defines as heterogeneous, with divergent objectives and generations. Auwers shows how a new generation of Belgian diplomats, formed in the colonial wake under Leopold II, managed to impose itself on the old generation, steeped in neutralism, and to marginalise King Albert, who supported the traditional policy, to finally trying to impose a proactive and annexationist line on the government at the Peace Conference. Reference is made here to territorial claims to the detriment of Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, as well as hoped-for expansions in Africa. But he also shows how, partly due to a lack of cohesion within the diplomatic corps, their ambitious schemes failed and how they ultimately contributed to the reinforcement of a general European phenomenon linked to times of democratisation, namely the empowerment of politicians, legitimised by elections, in foreign policy matters. The effects of pure and simple universal

male suffrage, applied in Belgium from 1919 onwards, come into play here, as well as the generalisation of coalition governments and the rise to power of progressive parties, notably the Belgian Workers' Party. The sociological evolution of the diplomatic corps, which is becoming increasingly diverse, should also be mentioned.

Auwers draws on a large corpus of sources, consisting of diplomatic, ministerial, parliamentary and Royal Palace archives, as well as published and unpublished memoirs of the protagonists. The private papers of diplomats are particularly well used, especially the diaries of Albert de Bassompierre, which remained unexploited until now. From 1917 to 1920, Bassompierre was Director General of Policy at the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a key position. But the author does not neglect the press either, especially the papers published by Belgians in exile during the conflict, as well as the role of journalists and lobbyists in terms of propaganda significantly influencing the decision-making process in foreign policy. These sources are analysed in the light of the work of historians, political scientists and sociologists who attempt to model diplomatic practices. The author is highly familiar with an interdisciplinary and international historiography, updated to 2021.

The book, divided into a prologue (before 1914) and seven chapters, follows a chronological and thematic plan which is quite convincing and allows the reader to follow the story easily, enhanced by numerous citations of sources and some revealing photographs. However, the reading requires a solid prior knowledge of the history of Belgium at the beginning of the twentieth century. Moreover, the numerous protagonists are certainly situated (although less systematically for the journalists, cf. Isi Collin on page 160) but the very tight interplay of interactions, power struggles and settling of scores between the numerous actors sometimes drowns the most attentive reader. Fortunately, the systematic introductions and intermediate conclusions mitigate this sensation. However, one must regret the absence of an onomastic index.

In spite of these rare drawbacks, Auwers' book is a considerable asset for all specialists and enthusiasts of the history of Belgian and European international relations at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since the now classic *Innocent Abroad*, which the late American historian Sally Marks devoted in 1981 to what must be acknowledged as Belgium's failure at the Peace Conference in 1919, no major publication had reconsidered or revisited this dossier, even though new sources appeared and the 'cultural turn', as the author claims, had offered promising new perspectives. Auwers explores the *agency* of each type of actor, deciphering their complex interplay, focusing on their backgrounds, their education, their conception of Belgium and its history, their personal ambitions, their friendships and enmities.

One of the great assets of the book is that it sheds new light, through the use of private correspondence and diaries, on the backstage of a certain number of 'moments' that were thought to be known, such as the ousting of

Eugène-Napoléon Beyens, diplomat and Minister of Foreign Affairs – the real central character of the book, in the end – or, that of his successor, Charles de Broqueville, whose classic biography by Henri Haag is here criticised for its hagiographic tendency. Another strength is that Auwers puts the spotlight on the ‘Congo generation’ within the diplomatic corps (Orts, Bassompierre) and that he has finely examined its cosmogony, between colonialism, rejection of an emollient neutrality and definition of an ambitious nationalism. According to the author, the failure at Versailles was ultimately Belgium’s own fault, and its leaders had to quickly reconvert and readapt themselves by returning to their first love, i.e., the colonial world, in various forms. Finally, Auwers reopens the ‘royal file’ and shows how the aftermath of the First World War signalled the end of the ‘time of kings’, a change of rules to which Albert I himself had to bow, even if his influence remained strong until 1920.

In conclusion, Auwers is undoubtedly highly skilled in defending his interpretations and reading grids. He also has a real talent, one additional asset which is more than rewarding, for untying the knots of plotting and a sense of suspense in writing. These qualities are fortunately supported by a sound heuristic base, which enables the reader to absorb his book in one alert gulp, and, asking for more, to regret that his whole thesis has not been published.

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