

Response

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This brief response discusses the principal themes raised by the three commentaries. In particular, it re-assesses my interpretation in *The Sorrows of Belgium* (2012) of the political normalisation of Belgium which occurred after the Second World War, the nature of the Belgian national and political community in the aftermath of the German occupation, and the way in which the events of the war years may have contributed to the democratic reconstruction of the Belgian nation-state.

Repliek

In deze korte reactie gaat Martin Conway in op de belangrijkste thema's die in de drie commentaren aan de orde zijn gesteld. Het artikel besteedt in het bijzonder aandacht aan zijn interpretatie van de terugkeer naar politieke normaliteit na de Duitse bezetting in België, en de manier waarop de oorlog mogelijk een bijdrage heeft geleverd aan de democratische reconstructie van de Belgische natiestaat, zoals dit in zijn boek *The Sorrows of Belgium* (2012) aan de orde komt.

Writing the history of Belgium must always be, to some extent, a mission, or even a self-assumed duty: an attempt to assert the value of Belgium as a subject, in the face of those within the country who would wish to approach the past through the prism of the regional and linguistic communities of the present-day, and those outside of the country who would question the value of studying a confined territory of north-western Europe, which has appeared to dwindle steadily in historical significance across the twentieth century. I am therefore enormously grateful to Nele Beyens, Mark Mazower and Nico Wouters for their thoughtful and generous assessments of *The Sorrows of Belgium*, but also for their willingness to accept the wider validity of the project.

In addition, however, I am indebted to them for their critical observations, and more especially for the ways in which those comments

help me to see the book in new ways. Foremost among those is the extent to which *The Sorrows of Belgium* is characterised by an amalgam of overlapping and insufficiently explicit agendas. The fact that, on two occasions, the commentators resort to the formula of ‘If I am reading Conway correctly’ is evidence not only that I did not always make myself sufficiently clear in my writing, but also that this rather overfilled monograph has a tendency to talk about too many subjects. In response, it is therefore incumbent on me not merely to be clear, but also to separate out the different levels of argument within the book. In these brief remarks, I shall therefore comment on what, in the light of the responses, should be regarded as three rather separate subjects: the events of the Liberation era, the evolution of Belgium as a national and political community, and the contours of post-war democracy.

Teleologies of reconstruction?

Most obviously, *The Sorrows of Belgium*¹ is an attempt to make sense of why events in Belgium took the course that they did between 1944 and 1947. Given the length of time it took me to write the book, amidst other distractions, it continues to surprise me that nobody wrote the book before me, and that so many aspects of the era of the Liberation remain to be studied in sufficient detail. The contemporary history of Belgium is of course a neglected field, its archives are dispersed, and its historians are not numerous; but, even so, it is remarkable that we lack detailed studies of, to cite three examples among many possibilities, the Socialist Party from 1944 to 1950, the development of a pro-Leopold movement within liberated Belgium, and the reordering of the state bureaucracy. As Beyens and Wouters rightly observe, my book was therefore in part overly driven by a concern to reconstruct the narrative of this highly complex period, emphasising the central role played certainly by Achille Van Acker (as Socialist Prime Minister from 1945 to 1946) but also by other members of the political elite. This was an extraordinarily fluid period, and one when the decisions taken (or not taken) by particular groups – the Catholic political leaders, the trade unions, and the British authorities, for example – did have a more than usual impact on the evolution of events: but in consequence, the book is neglectful of other groups, places and events that in my perspective did not influence particularly the final outcome. This is certainly true of local regional histories (of which we have much need) and the purges, which, as Mazower rightly remarks, are somewhat absent from the book, as indeed are some more amorphous groups such as the judiciary and the

1 Martin Conway, *The Sorrows of Belgium: Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944-1947* (Oxford 2012).

employers whose actions in this period are more difficult to reconstitute. The consequence is, as Beyens observes, a somewhat teleological narrative, which would have benefited from greater analysis of defeated groups, or of those events (such as concerted Leopoldist or Communist attempts to seize power) that were variously desired or feared but that simply failed to happen.

The period from 1943 to 1947 was indeed, as Beyens suggests, marked by a 'regime change'; but there is something about that phrase that to my mind seems to suggest too neat a formulation. For a regime change to occur, there has to be an existing regime, but (as I argue in the first chapter) by the latter war years Belgium possessed no effective regime, but rather a series of rival pretenders, none of whom possessed the legitimacy or the power to impose their authority. This was, therefore a revolutionary period when especially in certain localities and within key institutions such as the political parties and trade unions, power was fragmented, contested and reconfigured. Central to the argument of *The Sorrows of Belgium* is however, the recognition that this revolutionary process had a non-revolutionary, or if you wish counter-revolutionary, outcome. Why this should have been so is in many respects my principal preoccupation, and one which finds its explanation in the book at several levels, including the actions of the Allied authorities, those of the principal political forces, and the wider textures of Belgian society. However, as Mazower rightly observes, central to this process is my rather capacious and fuzzy use of the term 'elites'. Belgium was indeed a society with no shortage of elites, which reflected both its localised and pillarized character, whereby notions of universal citizenship took second place to more specific definitions of identity, each of which possessed its own hierarchies and organisational structures. 'Elites' is therefore a catch-all term, encompassing those from local notables to Church leaders, civil servants and the cadre of trade-union bureaucrats, who became the brokers and negotiators of power *vis à vis* the German occupiers, their Allied replacements, and ultimately each other, as a coherent structure of power in Belgium was gradually reconstructed after the near-collapse of authority in the winter of 1944-1945.

Whether, as Mazower suggests, this multiplicity of elites was an advantage or not for Belgium is, perhaps, a question of taste or of political preference. The elite-led character of Belgian politics in this era did however, emphatically provide a means whereby Belgium recovered its stability and indeed, to use another prominent term of the era, its normality. Here again Mazower rightly chides me for my loose use of a term, which was much invoked at the time but the meanings of which were multiple. For some, it indicated a return to some form of established order, a pre-war status quo; but for many others, especially those Belgians whose lives had been massively disrupted by the events of the war years, normality was above all a psychological goal, a place where people wished to arrive after an extraordinary period of stress, disruption and trauma.



▲ Members of the Belgian resistance pose for a photo in 1944, after the liberation. The picture was taken by the famous Belgian filmmaker André Cauvin. Image nr. 136756. CEGESOMA, Brussels.

One Belgium or many?

The influence of elites was, as I try to make clear in the book, also a principal reason why Belgium did not change fundamentally in its constitutional, socio-economic or political structures, in the Liberation era. This continuity of Belgian state and constitutional structures is, as Wouters correctly argues, a second preoccupation of *The Sorrows of Belgium*. I do not think it could have been otherwise. The question of how Belgium evolved from the unitary monarchist state that celebrated its centenary in 1930 to the very different situation of the 1980s must be the ‘meta-question’ that haunts any serious study of the political history of twentieth-century Belgium. The contribution that I attempt to make to that debate is two-fold. In the first place, my research led me to emphasise the vitality of a certain popular definition of Belgian patriotism – a sense of a Belgian popular community, legitimated by history, and united by key values – in the 1940s. That finding has not met with universal support; some critics of the book have rightly emphasised its highly circumstantial character, but also the limits to its reception, especially in the north of the country. In the second place, I also seek to discuss, especially given what I perceive to be the relative consensus about what Belgium was, why the liberation did not result in a broad re-foundation of the Belgian nation-state. Buried within that argument, and again open to question, is the unstated assumption that Belgium could indeed have been rescued at that time, and thereby perhaps forestalled (or at least deferred) what I regard as the rather separate history of the problems of the Belgian nation-state that developed from the 1960s onwards: but, as Wouters sternly and correctly warns me, to dream of other Belgiams is more than a little illusory. Belgium was (in 1830) a state before it was a nation; and definitions of Belgianness were always inseparable from a particular hierarchy of power relations – capitalist, political, regional and linguistic. To imagine, therefore, as I am on occasions inclined to do in *The Sorrows of Belgium* that all of this could have been thrown in the air and made into a different Belgium, risks becoming a rather implausible exercise in virtual history.

Democracy and/or order?

Finally, as Beyens and Mazower both remark upon, the case of Belgium almost always becomes a contribution to something larger, which in this case relates to the nature of the post-1945 West European democratic order. Both of those commentators have written with some distinction on that subject, and my own contribution follows in the wake of their work. However, the empirical material I present in the book does, I think, serve to emphasise the very deliberate and pragmatic spirit in which that democratic order was constructed. Control is of course a phenomenon that we associate most readily

with the often crude manipulation of political outcomes by the Soviet forces in central and eastern Europe in the later 1940s: but the Western military authorities, and more especially, their national political agents and allies, were hardly less preoccupied with ensuring the right outcome, even if their methods were generally more moderate and subtle. Indeed, everywhere where ‘authority’ seemed to be in danger, the priorities of the preservation of order, the dictates of economic reconstruction, and the avoidance of a descent into a radical or proto-Communist politics, tended to prevail over any responsiveness to the will of the people.

As I seek to argue in *The Sorrows of Belgium*, that was certainly true in Belgium. This was perhaps most obviously evident in the way in which Allied and Belgian officials sought to forestall a threat to the nascent post-war order from the unpredictable actions of King Leopold III. My book does, I hope, demonstrate that Leopold was in many respects the author of his own political and personal marginalisation; but the deep intolerance which his ambitions encountered owed much to the climate of fear that inhabited all those who sought to take charge of the country in the immediate post-liberation years. Allied authorities, political leaders and (for want of a better word) elites all felt that they had looked into something of an abyss of the collapse of order in 1943-1945, and they were therefore concerned to create a post-war order that was more stable than it was democratic. This again was a phenomenon that was evident elsewhere in Western Europe around the end of the war. Indeed, one of the reasons why it is difficult to regard the liberation of Western Europe as a moment of democratic openness (akin say to 1989 in central-eastern Europe) is that it was characterised by a pervasive distrust of the people. The legacies of the preceding decades had inculcated in the minds of many of those in authority a perception of the impulsiveness of the people, of their readiness to follow demagogic leaders and indeed of their capacity for anarchic violence and disorder. Post-war democracy was therefore, an anti-popular project – an attempt to channel the people into participation in a political process in which their role was to make the choices that those in authority had prepared for them.

Much of this is of course familiar from work on other European states, and especially on those states, such as France, Greece and Italy, where the shadow of the subsequent Cold War has served to throw into relief the anti-Communist and repressive priorities of those in authority: but the question which then arises is why, if so much of the politics of the liberation period was dominated by a wish to demobilise and constrain the people, those same people did not contest more directly the regime that came into existence. As I seek to demonstrate in *The Sorrows of Belgium*, the post-war rulers of Belgium gave the people neither the radical reforms that many demanded, nor the monarch whom many others earnestly desired; instead, they were presented with a durable diet of economic austerity and a limited and rather unappealing range of political options in the much delayed post-war elections that were finally held – we should remember on a limited male franchise – in 1946. Yet,

there was, at least after the summer of 1945, no sustained popular challenge from below to that process.

There, part of my answer might relate, as Wouters ironically observes, to my preoccupation with the personal skill of Van Acker and his particular form of populist paternalism, which I believe did serve to disguise the extent of the sacrifices being demanded of the Belgian people: but it also raises broader questions about the shape of post-war democracy, about which I have written in a wider European context elsewhere.² Belgium, as I repeatedly stress in *The Sorrows of Belgium*, was at this time above all a class society, and the acceptance of the post-war democratic regime owed not so much to the evident fact that it was better than its German wartime predecessor as to the way in which it reflected the changes in class relations that had occurred in Belgium since the onset of the economic depression in the early 1930s. Much work remains to be done on the socio-political history of Belgium in its mid-century decades, but the thesis that I sketch out in *The Sorrows of Belgium* is of a shift in social power during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s away from the former progressive class alliance of working class and liberal middle classes towards a more conservative alliance of rural and middle-class interests, that found its institutional expression in the politics of Christian Democracy. It was these groups who provided the social basis of the new Belgian state that was constructed after the war, while the working class, especially in Wallonia, adopted an oppositional politics evident in the bitter industrial strikes of the post-war years and, eventually, the development of an anti-Belgian and pro-Walloon sentiment.

On these, and other issues, there remains much work to be done, but also plenty more to discuss. *The Sorrows of Belgium* therefore needs to be rendered outmoded by subsequent historical work, and the comments of the commentators here give me cause to hope that this will indeed be the case. ◀

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2 See notably M. Conway 'The Rise and Fall of Western Europe's Democratic Age 1945-1973', *Contemporary European History* 13 (2004) 67-88.